Kanon:Volume 1

Contents

Prologue
Chapter 1 - The First Day of Transfer
Chapter 2 - She Loves Cats
Chapter 3 - Just the Two of Us
Chapter 4 - Snow Rabbit
Chapter 5 - Present
Chapter 6 - Opening the Door to Her Heart
Epilogue
References

Prologue

Snow was falling.

White, small shards of snow, falling through the grey sky, fleeting.

Snowing wasn’t anything special in this town in winter.

A handful of people coming out from the station, and a handful walking from the station to the shopping district. Everything was usual, advancing quickly.

Among these people, Yuichi Aizawa looked like a strange visitor. He pulled the scarf over his nose, shoved his hands into his pockets, and sat on the damp wooden bench.

It wasn’t his first time here, but it had been long since his last visit.

Slow.

The round clock in the middle of the station pointed at three.

Wasn’t the time appointed one?

He didn’t know her phone number, so he couldn’t make a call to confirm. And he didn’t want to scold anyone either, as he returned to this town already with a bit of loss and reluctance.

“Changing jobs? When did that happen?”

A few months ago, his mother told him of his father’s job change, but he wasn’t all that surprised.

His father had been changing jobs as a habit, and Yuichi had been changing schools since primary school.

He thought he would at last settle down in these years, yet things happened otherwise.

“I heard it’s during spring, but after a year, probably he’ll need to move again.”

“Okay.”

“Nasty, right? When we think of your academic studies, it’s quite a headache for you to adjust to your homework and classmates.”

“Then please let me live a life of my own joyfully starting from spring.”

“What are you talking about?”

His mother furrowed her brows.

“I don’t think you can handle housework all by yourself. You’ll have to prepare for the exams next year too, there’s no way you can do that.”

“So what can we do? Our house is basically the company’s dorms. We’ll have to move together.”

“Hmm. Right. It’s decided.”

“What’s decided?”

“This.”

His mother gave him a blueprint of a house. So they were finally deciding to build one. They had planned long for this, but chances always slipped.

“So this is the last time we’ll move.”

It seems we’re finally settled. His mother said happily.

“Where are we moving , then?”

His mother answered a town of the north.

“Do you still remember? That town you always went to at the summer break when you were in primary school.”

“Oh.”

Is it that town? But, that town…

“When you were there the first time, you must have thought snow peculiar. We always paid a visit to the Minase family. They have a daughter…what was she called again? Don’t you get along quite well with that cousin of yours?”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. You can meet a girl you haven’t seen for a long time too.”

“There isn't a need for this.”

“What, Yuichi. Why sulking? Do you hate moving?”

"..."

I was used to moving, but I hate the town.

I didn't know for sure what the reason was.

I do remember I had gone to the town several times. But what I did or what happened was long lost.

Lost were such memories, as if they had turned white.

Yuichi had a strong reluctance, but he couldn't explain since he couldn't remember the reason.

The matters with the Minase family went pretty quick. At first, the whole family planned to move together in spring, but since they had to deal with the paperwork for transferring to the school, Yuichi had to go first.

And the day had come.

Yuichi was still waiting for the girl of Minase whom he had to live with for a while.

Why did he love snow before?

It was cold when he touched snow, and bothering and dirty when stacked. There wasn't anything nice. If he had lost his memories, it must have been because he had slipped off the snow on the path and hit his head.

Cold.

Even his nostrils froze.

Yuichi continued to sit without twitching, as if protesting against the cold, white air, as well as the person who made him suffer by making him wait.

The longest time he could put up with this town was until his graduation, he asserted himself. Although it wasn't a pleasant idea for his mum, he had to live by himself and go off one day anyway. If he kept living in this cold and dull town, he was certain he would become cold and dull himself.

Suddenly, the cold air calmed.

The snow was piling up, even the wind was raging...yet...

Beside Yuichi appeared a pair of brown female shoes. Along the shoes, he glanced, were two slim legs, a uniform he had never seen, and long and straight hair.

Under the snowing sky, the girl looked at Yuichi.

Gentle eyes with a dip of dreamy slumber called forth his memories. It was more feminine than the one in primary school, but they were the same eyes.

"The snow...is piling up."

The girl murmured. Yuichi noticed the jacket on his shoulders had slowly turned white.

“It’s because I have waited for two hours.”

“What? What’s the time now?”

The girl looked at the clock tower with surprise.

“Woah. What.”

She spoke with a leisurely tone, in contrast with her words.

“I thought it was just around two.”

Even if it was two, it was still one hour late.

“Can I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“Isn’t it cold to stay there, not moving an inch?”

“Cold.”

“Wait, have you been numbed by the coldness?”

Yuichi waved his head, and snow fell from his head.

The girl took out a can of coffee and gave it to Yuichi.

“Here, for you.”

Yuichi took out his hands that had been in his pockets for two hours to get it. The can was still hot, and probably too hot for bare hands, but Yuichi felt his hands warm and comfortable by this heat.

“This is a present as my apology for being late.”

A can of coffee for being late two hours, uh?

“And to congratulate our reunion.”

“A can of coffee for two things? It’s been seven years, at least.”

He only remembered after seeing her, so he didn’t really raise his voice.

“Seven years, you say.”

The girl was smiling at Yuichi. Yuichi felt a bit embarrassed and rolled the can of coffee along his palms.

“Do you still remember my name?”

“You too. Do you remember mine?”

“Yes!”

Yuichi and the girl spoke together.

“Yuichi.”

“Hanako.”

“…”

The girl looked troubled. He didn’t quite make it.

“Jirou.”

“I’m…a girl.”

He didn’t make it again.

Yuichi plucked the ring of the can and drank the coffee in one gulp. The warm sensation spread out from his stomach to his whole body. Making a light sound, he stood up, patted off the snow, and flexed his muscles.

“So, let’s go?”

“…Yuichi…”

The girl made sounds of dissatisfaction. Yuichi took his backpack and took off, even when he didn’t know where to go.

“That’s rude, Yuichi.”

The girl followed behind him. So it was this feeling.

Searching in his blurred memories, Yuichi could remember a girl doing her best to follow him, despite being bullied by him.

It was this young girl.

Suddenly, another face, and another pair of eyes flashed in his mind.

But like the snow blurring itself with white fog, after a blink of an eye, that face vanished.

“Yuichi…”

The girl caught up with him. He increased his pace and walked in circles since he didn’t know where to head.

“My name…”

As if he couldn’t reach his destination as long as he couldn’t remember her name, he went in circles, the girl behind him. Others must have thought them freaks.

Yuichi glanced at the streets again.

The tall building in front of the station, the car terminal, and the shopping district. If there wasn't any snow, it could have been just any other street Yuichi had lived in before.

Streets he hadn’t gone to for seven years.

Snow he hadn't seen for seven years.

"My name…"

"I don't want to go in circles here now."

The reluctance to return is imprinted in his heart vividly.

But wherever one goes, the expectation of starting a new life is ignited.

"Yuichi."

Yuichi turned around to face his cousin.

"How long do you want to keep going around me? Let's go, Nayuki!"

"Ah!"

Nayuki's eyes flashed, as if she had suddenly been awakened.

"Absolutely!"

The snowflakes gathered in her eyelashes melted and flowed down.

Chapter 1 - The First Day of Transfer

"Let's go."

Nayuki called to Yuichi at the door.

"It's going to get dark if you don't go now."

"I don't want to. It's too cold."

Yuichi had his jacket on, but he was still reluctant.

"It's not that cold. Besides, I'm going out to buy stuff for mum. You promised you'd go at noon."

Pouting her small lips, Nayuki curled her braid around her fingertips.

Nayuki with braids. Nayuki at primary school, those days when Yuichi came to this town every winter. It seemed like a dream to him, but it was him all right.

"I didn't think it would get so cold."

In his dreams, Yuichi, a primary school kid, kneeled at the door.

"You'll need to swallow a thousand needles if you don't abide by your promises. It's in its growing period, so you'll have to swallow one thousand and five hundred."

"…I understand."

The two of them walked outside, shoulder to shoulder. His ears were frozen in pain by the cold air. Yuichi turned around.

“Forget it, I’m not going.”

“Dinner for Yuichi tonight will be red ginger.”

“...”

“Filling his bowl with red ginger, and letting him eat red ginger as a side dish. The soup is also going to be juice squashed from red ginger.”

There were only red gingers left in the fridge. So those who don’t buy stuff are going to eat ginger, fair?

Nayuki’s eyes told him.

He couldn’t stop her, now. He turned around again and got out. The snow stacked at a side emanated a biting chill. There was no way he could go out to the shopping district to buy something, Yuichi thought.

“No. I’m going back.”

“You just came out.”

Nayuki looked troubled. This look on her face drives Yuichi mad. Since primary school, looking back at his dreams, he's always been so repellent.

“Nayuki, you said it isn’t cold, but it is. That’s a lie, so you’ll have to swallow a thousand needles too.”

“Ah...”

“They’re put on top of each other also, because they’re in their growing period.”

“I can’t swallow such large needles.”

You wouldn’t even be able to swallow normal needles, but seemingly satisfied by Nayuki’s answer, Yuichi turned around and took off.

Yuichi also knew Nayuki didn’t really hate his silly jokes.

Like this, he came to Nayuki’s side every winter. How many years had past? The first time they met, both of them were very shy. But, gradually, they could talk to each other without holding back.

Gentle and leisure-like, Nayuki was almost the opposite to Yuichi, who was impatient and dissentious, but this probably made things the better.

“Wait here, Yuichi, I’m going to go buy things before the shops close.”

In front of the entrance of the shopping district, Nayuki and Yuichi parted ways. There was a shop for kids nearby, and Yuichi waited for Nayuki while looking at the toys and video games inside.

At that time, Nayuki made a big fuss.

"I told you many times you have to wait for me."

Right. I should have been waiting for Nayuki...I...

"The sun. The sun is coming out."

"Woah?!"

The sudden girl's voice ringing in his ear made him jump.

"Eat breakfast, and go to school!"

"Is it Nayuki?"

There was no other person who could produce such a sleepy voice. But after a glance at his surroundings, all he could find were paper boxes stacked like a mountain.

"The sun, The sun is coming out."

And then came a voice completely the same as before. Now he realised it was the alarm clock placed beside his bed.

"Eat breakfast, and go to school!"

Enough. Yuichi pressed the button of the alarm clock. More of its squeaking would only make him more sleepy than awake.

This alarm clock was borrowed from Nayuki yesterday night.

Although he took a day's rest yesterday home because of fatigue and holiday, he had to wake up today so as not to be late for the first day of transferring school.

Nayuki told him this was her favourite alarm clock, but he couldn't believe it recorded her own voice as the ringing tone. Giving it a better look, he could find a record button behind the alarm clock.

Let me tell her to give a normal alarm clock for me to use then. Yuichi changed, left his room, and came to a door with the sign 'Nayuki's Room'.

And at that moment.

Ding, ding ding. Dong, dong, dong. Beep, beep, beep.

Alarms ringing in unison came from the room.

"What the hell?"

Yuichi couldn't help but step back. He glimpsed at a corner of the stairs, where Nayuki's mother Akiko was calling for him.

"Yuichi, breakfast is ready."

"Oh, okay. Um..."

“I’m going to wake Nayuki up. Please eat breakfast first, Yuichi.”

“Okay.”

So Yuichi left the ringing room alone and went to the kitchen, scratching his head.

Minase’s house composed of the kitchen, the living room, Akiko’s bedroom, all on the first floor, while Nayuki’s room and two guest rooms were in the second.

“This house is quite big and lonely for the two of us. It’s great you had come to live with us, Yuichi.”

While they were having a chat, Nayuki’s mother Akiko smiled and talked with a gentle voice much like Nayuki. Akiko was young and beautiful. It was impossible to tell that she had a daughter, Nayuki, as old as Yuichi.

Minase’s family consisted of, since Yuichi was a kid, Nayuki and her mother only.

Why were there only two? Were the parents divorced? Yuichi didn’t know and didn’t want to either. Everyone had their own personal affairs. Besides, there were only two people. He would come to know soon enough by living here, for Akiko and Nayuki were spending their days happily together.

On the table were a brown toast, orange juice, half-simmered eggs, and salad with small tomatoes. The juice was self-made, squeezed appropriately. The salad’s seasoning was Akiko’s secret. Look. Even you could tell from a simple breakfast the harmony of this family.

“Thanks for the food.”

Hungry, Yuichi took a big bite of the toast, while Akiko served coffee. It smelled really great. Yes. A peaceful, winter morning.

Having served the coffee, Akiko returned upstairs. The ringing sounds subsided eventually. When she came back to Yuichi, he had finished the toast and the eggs, thinking of whether to ask for another cup of coffee.

“...Good morning.”

Her eyes half-open, Nayuki came out from behind Akiko. Although she had her uniform worn, she looked almost the same as sleeping, wobbling from head to toe.

“Ku.”

Making an alien sound, she, instead of sitting, fell into the chair beside the table.

“Have you woken up yet?”

“...maybe.”

Although her voice and face seemed like sleeping, Nayuki’s hands were busy with spreading strawberry jam on the toast. She then slowly stuffed the well-painted crimson bread into her mouth.

“Yummy. Strawberry jam.”

Nayuki smiled, and slowly drank coffee from her cup with cats on it.

“Nayuki, hey.”

“Yes?”

“I think it’s healthy to eat breakfast slowly, but can we make it in time?”

Substituting the function of an alarm clock, the television in the living room was broadcasting the last show, the fortune telling program.

“It doesn’t matter. But we have to run a bit.”

“Doesn’t that imply it does matter?!”

Yuichi got up in a flurry. From what he had learned through waiting for her and her sleepy mornings, he knew he couldn’t trust Nayuki’s perception of time.

“I’ll be waiting at the door. Hurry, Nayuki.”

Yuichi transferred to the same school as Nayuki. If he didn’t go with Nayuki, he wouldn’t even how to go to school.

“Yes. I’ll be quick.”

Words were merely words. In the end, it was already past eight when they got out.

“It’ll be fine if we run a bit.”

“Okay, quicker!”

The worst thing on earth was for a transfer student to be late.

Snow was piled up on both sides of the road.

Even the tress and the walls of the house were piled with snow, glowing under the sunlight.

Yuichi had no time to appreciate the scenery leisurely. Neither did he have the time to complain about the cold. He just puffed white smoke and kept on running with Nayuki.

“How many minutes do we have left?”

“Five…six…maybe seven.”

Although Nayuki ran along with Yuichi who ran with all his might, there was no sign of pain on her face. Yuichi remembered that she was the captain of the track team.

“We’re there.”

When his stomach was starting to ache, they had passed through the gates of the school at last. It was a white and big building with a large sports ground. And there was a classical lecture room, a thing that no other schools have. Many male students wearing flannel shirts and female students wearing the same uniform as Nayuki walked alongside.

“We made it….starting from today, this is your school, Yuichi.”

Nayuki raised her hand deliberately, as if introducing it to him like a tour guide.

At this moment, someone patted that hand lightly from behind.

“Morning, Nayuki.”

“Ah, Kaori. Good morning.”

Kaori had the ribbon with the same colour as Nayuki. There were also students with ribbons of colours green and blue.

“By the way, what a strange uniform we have.”

Male students wear old, dark blue flannel shirts and pants, while female students wear dark red one piece, with a white cape and big ribbons. It looked warm, fit for a school in the coldest place.

“How rude. Our school’s uniform is very popular. Some girls run to this school only for the uniform.”

Kaori refuted, and then…

“Um, who are you?”

“I can’t tell you who I am even if you ask.”

“He’s Yuichi, my cousin.”

“Ah! You’re that person Nayuki talked about on the phone!”

Kaori nodded as if she understood, and said, “Nice to meet you. I’m Kaori Misaka. You can call me Kaori.”

She nodded lightly and smiled, her beautiful brown hair swaying.

“I’m Yuichi Aizawa. You can call me Yuichi too.”

“I’ll remain more polite, Aizawa.”

Kaori smiled mischievously. Forget it, it didn’t matter how she called me.

“Is which class you’re in decided yet?”

Kaori seemed to be a positive, direct young girl.

“Not yet. I’m going to the office now.”

“I’m in the same class as Kaori. It would be nice if you’re in our class.”

“Ah, yeah…”

It didn’t really matter if we were in the same class. That being mentioned, if someone else knew I was living with a female classmate in the same house and studying in the same school and even in the same class, it would be quite embarrassing.

"Yeah, it would be nice."

But I had to nod a bit since Nayuki looked at me so intently.

"...right."

"Yes!"

Nayuki smiled ecstatically.

I didn't know whether God heeded Nayuki's wish, but I was brought to the classroom where Nayuki and Kaori were in.

"I am Yuichi Aizawa. Nice to meet you."

With a cold greeting, I bowed, lifted my head, and saw Nayuki secretly waving at me. Although it was only I who could see it, I still felt a bit embarrassed.

"Okay, sit there then, Aizawa."

The position the teacher pointed to was beside Nayuki, diagonally in front of Kaori. Nayuki greeted me with all smiles, and Kaori looked at my face with a weird face, smiling.

After I sat down, the teacher started speaking.

Because today was the opening ceremony, there was only a class meeting but no real lessons. While I was listening without paying much attention and glancing at the new list of textbooks to buy, my back was poked several times.

"Hey."

Turning back, I found an unfamiliar male student looking at me. Well, I didn't know anyone other than Nayuki, so everyone was unfamiliar.

"It's a waste to buy the textbooks only for the third semester. Take my textbook and copy it. It's fine."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Kitagawa."

"I'm Aizawa."

"I know, I heard your introduction."

"It's only polite to tell your name after the other person tells his."

"Oh, wait. Could you be a freak?"

"I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. Look, here's the textbook."

"Yes."

“Hey, Aizawa. You already have stuff to talk on your first day of transfer.”

The teacher said, smiling wryly, followed by laughter in the classroom. Even Nayuki and Kaori laughed.

I wasn’t the type of person who liked to attract attention.

Escaping everyone’s eyes stealthily, I heaved a sigh.

“You can’t help it. It’s the destiny of a transfer student.”

Kaori commented, after the class meeting.

“But when we talk about sudden transfer students, they should be beautiful young girls.”

Sitting at the back, Kitagawa hopped in the discussion.

“Yeah. I’m used to transferring to schools only to see the boys in the class becoming disappointed.”

“Uh, are you used to changing schools, Aizawa?”

“His parents' jobs made them move around. When he was small, he always moved here and there.”

“So it’s not the first time Aizawa is in this town.”

“Ah?”

Hearing Kaori say something out of the blue, I looked at Nayuki at my side. Nayuki, who was just about to go to her club activities, looked back at me with a face of question marks.

“I heard it from Nayuki. That Nayuki and Aizawa always played together when they’re small.”

“Oh…”

Yuichi corrected her, saying he had only come during the winter break.

“So you’re coming back to a town you miss.”

“I don’t really miss it…”

I wasn’t quite sure. All of the hectic stuff about transferring schools had kept me quite occupied to think about it. And when I now do, I couldn’t bring myself to remember anything about this town in the past.

Suddenly, I remembered the dream I had this morning. And this dream reminded me some memories I had.

On that day, I was going to buy some things at the shopping district with Nayuki. I…

“It’s time I head to the club.”

Cutting in the time I was silent, Nayuki spoke.

“So I’m heading off.”

“Let’s go down the door below together.”

“Me too.”

“Count me in.”

As a result, with Kaori and Kitagawa, we four walked to the corridor.

During our walk, Nayuki talked to me, her face wide with smiles.

“Yuichi, do you remember Kaori and Kitagawa?”

“Seems so.”

“Hey, hey.”

Surprisingly, Kitagawa criticised me.

“So the person who greeted us and got out of the classroom was Saito.”

“Okay.”

“Good luck. You only have 36 people left to remember.”

“Thanks.”

“Work hard.”

Nayuki put her hands in front of her and clenched into small fists.

“Nayuki, you always say that.”

Kaori spoke.

“Yes, I get full of energy every time I say that before my club activities.”

“I don’t know why every time I hear Nayuki say that I get depleted of energy.”

“I kind of agree.”

Is that so? Nayuki spoke, and Kaori and Kitagawa assented, laughing.

From my copious experience of transferring schools, I could tell these three were originally a small group, and they were inviting me to join them and form four.

“By the way, why aren’t you joining any clubs, Yuichi?”

Nayuki switched the topic back to me.

“Clubs aren’t my thing.”

I immediately replied. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to enter any under any circumstances, but that Nayuki had been carelessly talking too much about me.

Nayuki wasn't the person who would care about such communication nuances, but thinking it another way, I may have just cared too much.

"What a pity. But no one could do anything about it."

But once I look at her gentle smile, the more I couldn't forgive myself for not being able to remember the past, as well as my resistance to this city.

"So I want to go somewhere first."

Reaching the entrance, I headed off by myself quickly.

Nayuki, Kaori, and Kitazawa couldn't even hear what he was saying and tilted their heads in astonishment.

There wasn't any place for me to go to, as I was unfamiliar with the town.

But a lot of things had happened today, tiring me out. I wanted to be by myself and get some deep breaths the sooner the better.

Even when I was back home, Akiko was at work, so I was all by myself.

Nevertheless, I would only think of useless stuff if I just bore myself in the lonely and silent house, so I went to the shopping district for a walk.

The large shopping district, stretching from the station, through the broad street like a cross, was a good place to kill time. I could look around for convenience stores with commodities, bookshops, CD shops—everything was here.

I must have come here quite a few times when I was small.

But I didn't know whether this street had changed or remained the same.

I stopped suddenly in front a shop. It was a shop selling kid stuff. Beside the round door were toys and games boys would like, as well as decorations and beautiful stationery for girls.

I did dream of this shop this morning.

And the child waiting for me was Nayuki…and then…

"That person there!"

"Eh?"

Dong.

Then suddenly something hit me at the back.

"Ugu…it hurts."

Swaying from side to side, a short girl with wings at her back held her nose with her gloves.

Wait, wings?

"Ugu…I told you to move aside."

"Did you say it?"

The young girl still showed a crying face while she scratched her nose, but her other hand was holding a brown paper bag.

Looking at that face, I could tell something was forming in my memories.

The sunset at the shopping district. A crying girl. A brown paper bag.

"Hey."

"Ah, let's talk about it later!"

The young girl took my hand and ran off.

"I'm being chased right now!"

"What are you saying?"

I followed her and ran along the shopping district, a girl I had no idea where she came from.

Of course, I did run with another girl this morning.

Within my vision, I was seeing the running girl, her white feathers dancing lightly.

Then it ran left and right like playing tricks. Finally, the girl went through a small path in the shopping district and stopped at a big open space at the end.

"I-It's fine now, being here."

Panting, the girl held the paper bag tightly.

"So who and why are you being chased?"

There was a lot of things I wanted to ask, but let's start with the basics.

"I can't tell you."

The girl looked depressed.

"Because I don't want to pull irrelevant people in."

"I think I'm totally pulled in."

"Ugu…ah, right. Do you want to have a bite? Taiyaki."

The girl was obviously trying to change the topic, as she took out a hot taiyaki from the paper bag.

"Don't you want it?"

Looking at my reluctance, the girl was astonished.

Actually, I stole glimpses behind me as I was running.

An old man wearing an apron looked around, searching for someone, and ran along the shopping district. Although I wasn't a-hundred-percent sure, I did remember seeing him sell taiyaki.

By common sense, there was only one reason for someone to hold a taiyaki bag while being chased by a taiyaki seller.

"Taiyaki is most delicious when eaten after it is just baked."

The young girl took a taiyaki from the paper bag and took a big bite.

Looking at her, I also felt my hunger unable to withstand.

Besides, the sweat I produced by running had cooled down by the night wind.

I needed something to eat.

"Give me one."

"Okay."

I quickly took a bite and talked to the girl while munching.

"But you have to pay for it when you have the money."

"Ugu..."

The two of us sat on the old tires on the ground and ate the taiyaki.

I took one, while she was eating her third.

"You eat quite a lot, for someone as small as you."

"I'm not small. You're a student, right? My age is similar to yours."

"Really? For someone wearing wings at her back."

"Wings?"

The young girl widened her eyes, tilting her head.

"What are wings?"

"Wings are wings. Those wings at your back."

At first glance, it looked like those pair of wings were on her back, but with a closer look, you could tell they were on the bag.

"My back..."

The young girl stood up and turned around. When she turned to the back, the wings came to the front.

"I can't see them."

The young girl spun a good few circles to see them, but she couldn't.

"Ugu…I can't see them."

After looking at her spinning circles, I was certain of one thing.

Right.

This girl was a freak.

I had forgotten I had been said the same thing by my classmate before.

"Hear me. Don't move your legs and try turning your head around."

"Hmph."

Doing what I had said, the young girl seemed to have finally noticed her wings and smiled.

"Woah. It's real."

The young girl shook her back, vibrating the wings.

"How cute wings."

"Do you know there were wings on your backpack?"

I tried to touch the dancing wings. They were light wings made of plastic or the sort.

"This must be quite popular now."

"I'm telling you."

The short, young girl, with small legs, and who calls herself *boku* (used exclusively for young boys in Japanese), looked well with her toy-like wings.

"I'm Ayu."

Finishing the last Taiyaki, the young girl squeezed the open bag with a flapping sound.

"Ayu Tsukimiya."

Speaking of which, I remembered I hadn't told her my name.

"I'm Yuichi. Yuichi Aizawa."

"Yuichi."

Ayu repeated my name.

"Yuichi…?"

"Yes, what's the matter? Why the weird look on your face?"

"Weird looks are not needed…"

Ayu repeated my name, with a sophisticated look.

"Hmm."

"Yes?"

Could we have seen before?

"...nothing."

Although I wanted to ask, I hesitated.

Ayu was certainly a strange person, but it made me quite spirited from talking with her.

There was no need to add in those memories I couldn't remember to our spirited talk.

The orange sunset had, when I had not noticed, turned into a dark blue colour.

"So let's say goodbye now!"

"Yeah."

"It would be nice if we could meet each other again."

"Would it?"

"Ugu...it would!"

Ugu seemed to be a constant expression of hers. When we meet the next time, I would probably pretend to make one at her face.

"Yeah. It would, if we could."

"Yes!"

Ayu nodded with a spirited, smiling face.

I felt a bit sorry for having her to smile at me so genuinely.

She ran off, waving her hand incessantly and saying 'goodbye', her wings swaying.

I didn't even have a single idea of where she would be going back.

Chapter 2 - She Loves Cats

Oh no...

"The sun. The sun is coming out."

I forgot to tell Nayuki to give me another alarm clock yesterday.

"Eat breakfast, and go to school!"

"Yeah, right."

I stretched my hand under the sheets and stopped the alarm clock. My hand touched here and there and pressed the button of the remote control and adjusted the temperature of the air conditioner higher.

Although a winter's morning sucked wherever you were, it was even tougher here. I moved on the bed slovenly and got up after the room had been warmed.

In case I forget to change the alarm clock again, I knocked Nayuki's door.

“Are you awake?"

She couldn't have woken up. After a while, although I heard the chorus of those alarm clocks, there wasn't any other living sound in the house. After saying stuff like ‘I am coming in’, I gave the door a light push.

“Waghh.”

Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring. Dong, dong, dong. Beep, beep, beep, beep. Get up! Get up! Get up! Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding.

The room was rife not with air but with noise. Nosiy as hell. Placed on the cupboards and tables were different kinds of, big and small, cute, pretty, even some scary, alarm clocks. They were ringing in unison.

Behind them, Nayuki was sleeping soundly and peacefully.

Wearing pajamas with cat prints, she had beside her a frog plushie; though a bit childish, her long hair scattered on the bed and her closed eyes and eyelashes look extremely feminine.

How cute…

No wait!

I had to first doubt why she could still sleep so peacefully in this environment. My!

“Hey, Nayuki! Wake up, Nayuki.”

As if wanting to wipe away the waver in myself, I tried to call Nayuki with a harsh voice.

“Ku…”

“Wake up!”

“Ku…”

“WAKE UP!”

“…ku…”

Ha…ha…

“What's the matter, Yuichi?”

Akiko's voice came from downstairs. My voice was clear and loud, heard even on the first floor, yet Nayuki didn't even twitch.

"Sorry, there isn't anything."

Let me leave it to Akiko then, there isn't another way than shaking her. Just when I decided to give up, Nayuki made a 'Kumi' sound, shook her a head several times, and opened her eyes.

"...eh...Yuichi?"

Nayuki murmured and asked why I was here and such, but I heard nothing because of the noisy alarm clocks. I gestured to her to turn off the alarm clocks and go downstairs.

"What a rare scene, to see Nayuki waking up and going downstairs normally."

Akiko expressed her awe beside the breakfast table.

"Is that really waking up normally?"

"From now on, why don't you wake her up every morning?"

It was Nayuki's mother all right. What she said went completely off track from the topic. Anyway, I decided to reject her suggestion at the spot.

"Yuichi, did you go home right after school yesterday?"

Nayuki asked, while spreading jam on the toast.

"No. I took a stroll at the shopping district. I wanted to remember where some shops are."

"I see. But there isn't much difference from back then."

"Um...I seem to have forgotten a lot of things."

"Is that so?"

Nayuki stopped the toast that was being thrown into her mouth and eyed at me.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Nothing."

I gulped down the coffee and stood up, for I felt being sympathised or reproached when Nayuki eyed me like that.

"Hurry. We've got to go, Nayuki."

"It's still early."

Nayuki ate her toast with gusto.

"Breakfast is more delicious when you taste it slowly."

“Okay, hurry. What you say about time isn’t reliable.”

I forced her to complete her breakfast.

Only after I had arrived to school did I remember I had forgotten to tell her about the alarm clock.

“Ah! So you two are living together?”

During break time, Kitgawa’s shocking scream became the centre of attention.

“No, um, that's…”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Nayuki said at the same time as I did, wasting my efforts of denial.

“Yuichi woke me up this morning.”

Ohoh…the class was aroused.

“Oi, oi.”

“Good job, Aizawa.”

“What. I thought of being your girlfriend, Aizawa.”

These random and even strange comments came in, placing Nayuki and I now in the centre of attention.

It all started when Kitagawa asked for my house’s telephone number, and while I was pondering, Nayuki jumped in and told him her number.

I was now in deep regret for not stopping Nayuki beforehand to keep the fact that we were living together a secret.

On the other hand, Nayuki was just lightly blinking her eyes, unable to read the atmosphere, asking Kaori, “Why is everyone so surprised?”

For Kaori, she just smiled with a troublesome look, as if she knew what would happen. What was she really thinking?

“It’s for a while only. Our family planned to move in at spring, but because of school, I had to come first and live at Nayuki’s house.”

I was quite embarrassed, as I felt my face heating up.

“So in return for letting you live there, you’re going to wake Minase up?”

Someone sitting faraway made a thoughtless response, making me infuriated.

Shit! It isn’t like I wanted to come!

“So? Everyone has their own private affairs. It’s rude to barge in.”

If it wasn’t for Kaori who helped us, it might have gone even worse.

"Yeah. They are cousins after all."

Kitagawa stood at my side as well.

The two of them soothed the classroom back to its calmness. I heaved a sigh and rested my chin on my hands.

There were a few classmates who came and talked with us with that topic as an excuse, so it wasn't all bad that my classmates knew Nayuki and I were living together.

Even so, I didn't feel all that well for Nayuki to speak without considering the effect and those involved.

I wanted to let myself free from these affairs for a while, so…

"Yuichi, hey. Club activities are suspended tomorrow, so let's go to the shopping district together."

After school, when Nayuki offered this meeting, I quickly…

"No, thanks."

…rejected her coldly.

"There's a large CD shop, but it's difficult to find."

"I'll find it myself. Oh, it's time to go to the club, isn't it?"

"Yes…um…tell me if you can't find it, Yuichi."

Smiling, Nayuki waved her hands, and went to the building for club activities.

So I went out of the entrance by myself. It was snowing outside again.

I didn't bring an umbrella.

Although I wanted to go to the shopping district to kill some time, it looked impossible with this amount of snow.

I threw my backpack on my head and ran out.

That girl…who ate Taiyaki and was called Ayu…she should be there at the shopping district today too.

Running, I start to remember her small figure with wings flapping on her bag.

On the second day, I woke up without the alarm clock.

"Um."

On the breakfast table, I pushed forth the alarm clock recorded with Nayuki's voice.

"I'm sorry. Can you give me another one?"

"Eh?"

Eating the strawberry jam toast happily, Nayuki stopped.

“...um, actually, I can’t really get up in the morning too, so I need something more powerful in the morning. This one you gave me is quite something, but...”

“Okay, I understand.”

Nayuki remained smiling, and continued eating her toast.

“I’ll bring the biggest alarm clock to your room tonight, Yuichi.”

“...”

I thought she would get mad and say that she gave me the one she loved the most, but what she said now caught me off guard.

“I’m full.”

Nayuki drank the orange juice and wiped her lips with a napkin.

“You’re pretty quick today.”

She would eat two loafs of toast usually, but she only ate one today.

“Because we ran yesterday and the day before, so I’m thinking of walking today.”

“Is that so?”

But probably she was still mad that I mentioned about the alarm clock, so she couldn’t eat...no, I don’t think she will care about this stuff...Ehhh!

“Eh? Is the coffee very bitter, Yuichi?”

Akiko said, looking at my face.

“No. It’s good today too.”

I made a smile in a flurry.

I don’t understand. For example, I like Nayuki’s sleeping face, but I get frustrated when she treats me gently. And her weird character gets on my nerves; when I begin to ponder whether I had hurt her, my heart would grieve.

What is wrong with me?

Nuisances keep coming up from the past I can’t remember.

Nayuki and I walked on the street earlier than usual.

The snow had ceased yesterday, so the weather was good today. Yet it was cold even when the sun was out. The wind blew against the piled snow, the snowflakes fluttering like white smoke.

Nayuki walked without saying anything.

“Hey.”

When I tried to find something to talk about, Nayuki stopped.

“...ah.”

Nayuki usually looks something afar while walking, but she was now staring at a point.

It was the eaves of somebody’s house.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s a kitten.”

“What?”

There the brown kitten sat. It was kneeling down, folding her front legs, and purred like yawning.

“What’s wrong with the cat?”

“It’s so cute...”

Nayuki said with a sweet, husky voice that hinted harm. Her puppy eyes grew larger as they become captivated by the kitten.

“Cute? That’s just a normal cat.”

“It’s so cute!”

I shrieked from her immediate disagreement. I couldn’t believe she would respond so quickly.

“Yuichi, it's weird to say that cute thing isn’t cute. It’s so cute. Will it let me pet it? I want to touch it and hug it.”

Her speech gradually returned to its slow tone, and entranced, she approached, wobbly, to the eaves where the cat was. Noticing Nayuki, the kitten did not escape but became cautious. It was a stray cat, but it had got used to dealing with people.

“Kitty.”

But I pulled Nayuki’s stretching hand in reflex and stopped her.

“Wuu.”

Nayuki also shook off her hand in reflex, but I wouldn’t let go of her.

“No.”

“Stop. Kitty, kitty.”

Nayuki complained like a kid.

“No way, you’re allergic to cats.”

Reproached, Nayuki turned around with surprise.

“Have you remembered? Yuichi, of the things in the past...”

“It just sprang into my mind.”

Those memories were still vague. There was a scene of Nayuki and a cat.

Nayuki, in tears, was holding a cat, with Akiko at a side, troubled.

“I love kittens.”

Trying to touch the cat as much as she can, the little Nayuki wanted to rub the cat with her cheeks, despite her reddening nose.

“it’s not recovered yet. If you touch the cat, you won’t be able to bring that face to school.”

“I don’t care. Yuichi, let go.”

“If I let go, you’ll run off to the cat.”

“Because it’s a kitten.”

“This isn’t an answer at all!”

I forcefully pulled her by the wrist.

“Yuichi, I hate you. Kitty…kitty…it might be an abandoned cat. It might be hungry too. I have snacks in my bag for you, kitty.”

“That’s enough, come back.”

“Wuu…”

Being pulled, Nayuki left two lines on the snow by her legs.

Even when we had arrived to school, she kept talking about kittens before the lesson.

By the way, the progress at this school was quite fast. I had no idea of what was being taught.

Naturally, I spent more time idling in class, half-awake.

Kittens…uh…

I eyed at Nayuki beside me. She was concentrating on listening the teacher.

The mechanical pencil she was using for notes had a big, round cat figure on it.

To think about it, her pajamas were printed with cats, and so was the jacket she always wore.

She really like cats.

Still, she couldn’t touch them.

Yes…at that time too…

The first time Nayuki picked up a cat was when I went to play at the Minase house.

She found a cat along the road, with me at her side. Nayuki said she heard purring sounds from a paper box. With deeper observation, the paper box was taped, mostly by the one who abandoned it. Nayuki and I tore the tape madly and opened the box. The weak cat, just opening its eyes, was purring for help. Nayuki held the cat in her hands and brought her home.

“Mum, look at this poor kitten. Can we adopt it? Please?”

Nayuki with braids, pleaded to Akiko in tears.

Akiko of course agreed, but since that night, Nayuki’s face became strange.

“Wuwu…shi…”

Hearing Nayuki crying, I ran to look for Akiko.

“What’s wrong, Nayuki?”

“My body is hot.”

Sleeping with the kitten under the sheets made Nayuki’s face heated and red. Although Akiko quickly made her drink some children fever medicine, she still sneezed all night, seemingly in pain.

On the next day, Nayuki was brought to hospital and diagnosed with an allergy to cats.

Akiko couldn’t help but to tell Nayuki that they couldn’t take care of cats.

“Mummy will find an owner for it.”

“No…I want to take care of it. I want to care of this kitten.”

Nayuki cried, holding the kitten. Her sorrowful tears came along with her allergic tears, covering her face.

“Because I love kittens.”

“Nayuki…”

I, who had been looking at Nayuki for a while, couldn’t help myself after seeing her cry.

“Nayuki, it’s fine. One day, when you grow up, there will definitely be a medicine to cure cat allergy. You can then take care of cats.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Of course.”

I had no evidence, but I nodded just to comfort her.

“Yay…”

Though crying, she showed a smile.

That kitten was finally adopted by a kind, old wife and husband.

The sad thing was that there was no cure to cat allergy even now, but Nayuki's love for cats hadn't changed any bit.

Despite being allergic, she thrived to feed the stray cats.

Not only cats, but also birds having fallen from nests, and rabbits coming from nowhere would fall into her caring category.

And she was now taking care of a dissentious boy who had vague memories…uh?

"What the hell."

I laughed in a low voice of my own ridiculous thought.

Nayuki must have looked at me because of my voice, but I remained composed and waved at her.

"I'm back~~"

Nayuki returned late today. Even when she had club activities, she wouldn't be as late as returning when Akiko had prepared dinner.

"Hey, what happened, Nayuki?"

"Nothing…"

"But isn't your face red?"

"I told you it's nothing."

Watching television at the living room, I took a glance at her face while pretending to get beverages at the kitchen.

"It'll get good quickly…ayychu…what's for dinner?"

Her nose was red and puffy, her eyes teary.

I immediately knew the reason of her poor state.

Cat's fur was stuck on her uniform and skirt.

"Dinner is wonton soup."

Akiko touched Nayuki's forehead. Telling her it was fine, she took off her hand.

"I like wonton soup. Let me first change my clothes."

Sneezing repeatedly, Nayuki climbed up the stairs lightly.

"Hey."

I called her from behind.

"What's wrong? Yuichi."

Nayuki stopped and turned around in front of her door.

“Brush it with a brusher when you’re done changing.”

“…”

“If you don’t, you’ll get allergic again.”

“Yuichi, good eyesight…”

“This isn’t what I mean.”

“Okay, I’m going to brush it. Thanks.”

It wasn’t the first day she derailed the topic.

“Um. Did you find it? That cat this morning.”

“Yes. Close from the place we were. When I approached it, it didn’t run away and let me pet it. It wasn’t unhappy when I held it in my hands too.”

As if remembering the lingering touch of the cat, she closed her palms in front of her chest and closed her eyes.

“Warm, and soft…kitty…”

I could imagine her playing with the cat, tears running down her face.

She would have purred along with the cat, forgetting she was a human herself, playing ecstatically.

“I’m really sorry.”

“For what?”

“I promised you that there will be a medicine to cure cat allergy, yet there isn’t.”

“…ah…you remember those things, in the past.’

I nodded, and she smiled.

“It’ll be great if I can remember them bit by bit.”

“Um…wait, so don’t talk about me for now.”

I lightly patted her head. Letting out a sound ‘It hurts’, she pressed her head with her hand.

“Um…anyway, it doesn’t matter if there isn’t any medicine to cure the allergy.”

“Why?”

“Because whether I’m allergic doesn’t affect my love for cats.”

“I see.”

I felt a feeling almost of respect towards the speaking and nodding Nayuki.

If I were Nayuki, I wouldn't touch cats if I couldn’t, even if I love them. Moreover, I might even bear hate for being allergic to cats, despite loving them so much. Perhaps I would tell myself, *it’s enough. I hate cats and anything about them.*

Nayuki didn’t think or put too much thought into this stuff, regardless in the past or at the present; she was very honest and direct to the things she love.

...to me, as well, probably.

I felt I could start to understand the sophisticated feeling I held towards her.

“Oh, by the way,”

Nayuki went into her room and brought an alarm clock so big she had to use both hands.

“You wanted a powerful alarm clock, right? I don’t use this very often, so it can wake you up at the spot.”

“I don’t need it now.”

Maybe an alarm clock of that size would only be harmful to my heart.

“Is that so? Okay.”

“That one is fine.”

“That one? Which?”

“Um...that one with your voice.”

“Of course!”

Sparks flashed from her eyes. Did I worry too much?

On the following day, after school.

“Your club activities are suspended today, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then, why don’t we go to the shopping district today? I said I didn’t want to, but it’ll be quite a hassle to find the CD shop by myself.”

“Sure, let’s do it.”

“Are you two going out together?”

Kaori seemed to have heard our conversation. Kitagawa smiled mischievously.

“We didn’t really plan to go just by ourselves.”

“Do you want to go too, Kaori and Kitagawa?”

“I have a part-time job.”

“I’ll pass today.”

Kaori smiled with an ulterior meaning. I could sense her smile was the smile she put on when I first introduced myself.

Soon after leaving school, the two of us parted ways from Kaori and Kitagawa.

The shopping district was having the winter special sale, bustling with noise and excitement.

“This shop sells the most manga.”

“This is the best ramen shop in the whole street.”

Familiar with the shops, Nayuki was a local indeed.

She even knew where the CD shop that was so hard to find was. And I found the new album I wanted to buy.

Then, she stopped in front of a café named ‘A Hundred Flowers’.

“Yuichi, the strawberry parfait here is super delicious!”

“Okay.”

“It’s really delicious. The strawberry parfait here.”

“...okay.”

“The strawberry parfait here is yummy.”

“I know, I know! Let’s go in!”

“You have to treat me, Yuichi.”

“Wuu...”

I couldn’t say no since she had lead the way.

With dark brown floors, silk tablecloth, and hanging flower circles, this was certainly a shop girls would like.

Although embarrassed, I casted away my doubts once I could see Nayuki eating strawberry parfait happily.

“Strawberry jam and parfait. You really like strawberries, Nayuki.”

“Yes. I love them...so can we order one more?”

“I don’t have enough money today.”

“I-If you have enough money another day, will you treat me? Say yes.”

Nayuki’s senses grow sharp at things related to strawberries.

When we left the shop, Nayuki said she wanted to have a look at the clock shop. So I waited for her in front of the shop.

At this moment, someone patted my shoulder from behind.

“Nayuki?”

Turning around, I saw a winged bag, a jacket, and mittens. There wasn’t any taiyaki today.

“Good afternoon, Yuichi.”

“Oh, it’s just Ayu.”

“Ugu…you’re so rude.”

"I was thinking—it couldn’t be Nayuki.”

I was facing the door standing, so Nayuki couldn’t have possibly gone to my back without my noticing.

“Na…yuki?”

Ayu said the name she hadn’t heard before and titled her head.

“Is it food?”

At this moment, Nayuki came out of the shop holding a bag of stuff.

“That’s Nayuki. Do you want to try eating it?”

“Ugu….”

“Yuichi?”

Nayuki looked at Ayu and I, back and forth.

“Oh, this is Ayu. Her occupation is taiyaki thief.”

“Ugu…that hurts.”

“Taiyaki thief?”

“N-No. I will apologise to that old man later and pay him back. I was just too hungry back then.”

“Back then?”

I then explained to Nayuki of how I met Ayu.

So now I introduce Nayuki to Ayu.

“This is my cousin, the daughter of the family I’m now living together with.”

“Living together?”

“Yes. Now.”

"I see…"

Ayu looked at Nayuki with a moment of enlightenment.

"Okay, can I call you Ayu-chan?"

Nayuki entered the conversation.

"Sure. Ayu-chan works fine."

"You can call me Nayuki-chan too."

"Help, stop it, no."

I interrupted. [1]

"What a shame…"

Nayuki shrugged.

I compared Nayuki and Ayu.

Nayuki: has a slim body of a track athlete, long hair, and looks like having a peaceful dream.

Ayu: has a small body and slim like a boy, bright eyes that swirled with energy.

Although they make two opposite impressions, they agree on my rudeness and chatted happily.

"What are you going to do now, Ayu-chan?"

Ayu's eyes lost its glamour instantly.

"Is there something wrong?"

"I-I am looking for something here."

"Something to buy?"

"No. Something I lost. I plan to look for it every day before I find it."

"Let's look for it together, shall we?"

Ayu shook her head. Her smile that was now drained of all the energy looked surprisingly weak and superficial, astonishing me.

But it was only for a moment.

"So it's time we leave. Ayu-chan."

"See you."

"Yes, see you. Nayuki-chan, Yuichi."

Ayu regained her smile when she left.

"Ayu-chan is so cute."

Nayuki said, when we had walked near our house.

"But she's a freak."

"I don't think she wants you to call her that."

"Hey."

"You said you met her three days ago for the first time. Is it true?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"I think I've heard of her. About meeting with Ayu before...or probably just her name."

"..."

What Nayuki was saying probably had to do with my lost memories.

To ask why, I had a nostalgic feeling when I first met Ayu.

"I really met her three days ago."

But I still reckon I had only met her for just a short time.

The doors of my memories were opening slowly, and it wasn't all that painful a thing. When I find myself able to remember the allergy Nayuki had to cats, I feel a lot better.

But I can't for Ayu, at least not now.

There was something, something strong that is resisting my memories from connecting to Ayu.

Akiko seemed to have returned home, as we could smell the aroma of dinner upon opening the door.

"We should have invited Ayu-chan for dinner."

"Yes."

I deliberately changed the topic.

"Oh, what did you buy at the clock shop?"

Nayuki looked amused of my question and smiled.

"An alarm clock."

"The heck?!"

Weren't there enough alarm clocks in her room?

"You won't get up even if you have more alarm clocks, Nayuki."

"I bought a big one today, so it'll be fine tomorrow."

Nayuki nodded in confidence.

“I’m telling you. This is the reason your room is stuffed with alarm clocks.”

“Eh…”

I am going to wake up! Nayuki said, but I reckon that impossible.

Of course, what happened tomorrow was exactly as I had expected.

Chapter 3 - Just the Two of Us

“Here comes the chicken and egg donburi!”

“I’m sorry, is the C set ready yet?”

“Today’s fried noodles with bread is sold out.”

The cafeteria during lunch break was as bustling as a local event.

“What a scene.”

Although I had transferred for almost a week, this was the first time I came to the cafeteria. I was stunned by its hugeness.

“What are you doing? You’ve got to be quick to buy good stuff!”

Kitagawa pulled me to the line for buying meal tickets.

“Anyone’s easily overwhelmed by this scene on the first time they come.”

Kaori said, while she lined up behind us.

“I’m going to buy set A today.”

Nayuki seemed to have made up her mind.

The cafeteria was situated at the best place in school. It was a round structure, surround by glass windows, and in the centre a kitchen and reception.

“It’s pretty after being refurnished. The food comes in huge servings and cheap. You can also buy bread and drinks nearby. It’s very popular.”

Kaori explained.

Just hearing her made me hungrier. As I look at the sample photos and the price, I pondered whether I should have the pork set or the vegetable and fried meat set.

“I want set A.”

“You’re quite obsessed with set A.”

Kaori continued to clear my doubts.

"There's a strawberry dessert included in set A, am I right?"

"Yes!"

That was why Nayuki was so resolved in her choice.

"But you don't line up here for set A."

Kitagawa reminded.

"What? Really?"

"Kitagawa comes to the cafeteria every day. He's quite the professional. Kitagawa, why don't you tell her earlier?"

"I only know now that Minase wants set A."

"Okay, let it go."

Weirdly, I tried to stop them from getting into an argument.

Nayuki went into another line, and everyone got back later afterwards.

But while Kaori, Kitagawa, and I were holding our lunch sets, Nayuki was still standing there with her hands open.

"What's the problem? You suddenly put your heart into losing some weight?"

I tried to be silly, but Nayuki just shook her head in sorrow.

"Set A is sold out."

"Then pick another one."

"Only set A has the strawberry dessert."

"The cafeteria isn't 'a hundred flowers'."

"Wu…"

"Let me treat you to a strawberry parfait at 'a hundred flowers' if you want strawberries."

"Really?"

Nayuki immediately brightened up. What an energetic fellow.

"So go buy something else and come. We'll wait for you."

"Sure! Sorry, Kaori, Kitagawa. I'll buy the quick curry rice."

Nayuki quickly ran to the meal ticket machine. What a bothersome fellow, I said, and found Kaori and Kitagawa poking each other with a smile of an ulterior meaning.

What are you guys doing, I said, squeezing in between them.

....

“So I’ll end it quicker today.”

“Okay, I’ll be waiting at the bookstore.”

Nayuki nodded with a “Yes!” and rushed out of the classroom.

“What’s that, a date?”

Kaori nosed in.

“No. I promised I’d treat her to a strawberry parfait at the cafeteria, you remember? I heard ‘a hundred flowers’ is doing a discount today, so I chose today for it.”

“Okay...”

“Kaori, your face that looks like you know some secret bothers me.”

“I don’t know anything.”

A classmate came by while we were chatting.

“Goodbye, Misake and Aizawa.”

“Bye.”

“See you tomorrow.”

I waved to him. Kaori said, noticing me,

“Getting used to school, Aizawa?”

“Probably.”

“I think I can talk with you a lot easier now.”

Seems so. Although I was still not very used to school, I felt comfortable with getting along with Kaori and Kitagawa, as well as being at Nayuki’s side.

My memory was still vague, but it didn't really bother me.

“To be honest, I thought you were a fearful person, but I know it’s just a misunderstanding.”

“What does that mean? I thought this has been the first time I met you.”

“Y-Yeah. It’s just a way of putting it.”

It seemed I need to have a good talk with Kaori to clear my suspicion towards her.

“It’s about time we should leave. You’re going to the shopping district, right? Let’s walk to the gate, then.”

Noticing my expression, she quickly packed her things for leaving.

For I felt there was some more time before going to the bookstore, I spent some time at the arcade. I tried some new games, but I couldn’t get ahead of myself since I might use all the money I had to treat Nayuki.

When I left the dusty arcade, I bumped into Ayu.

She was holding a taiyaki bag.

“Is it taiyaki again? You really like this, don’t you?”

“Yes. Taiyaki is my favourite. Do you want some, Yuichi?”

“Sure,” but when I stretched my hand, I stopped.

“No thanks. I’ll pass today.”

“It’s fine. I’ve paid for it this time. The old man even gave me two extra ones because I love his taiyaki so much. Look!”

Ayu opened the bag, inside containing five hot, steaming taiyakis. Their sweetness and aroma were luring me.

“...but I have to eat something sweet later. I say next time.”

“Is that so? With Nayuki-chan?”

“Because something happened, yeah.”

“You get along well with Nayuki-chan, Yuichi.”

Ayu looked a bit lonely.

“So-so. Do you want to come to ‘a hundred flowers’? I don’t think there’s a taiyaki parfait, though.”

Hey wait, am I going to treat two people now? Oh rats, I shouldn’t have gone to the arcade.

“No thanks.”

“Hey, don’t be shy.”

I could borrow from Nayuki if I didn’t have enough money.

“No, really. I’m going now. See you, Yuichi.”

Ayu shook the wings on the bag she always wore and ran off.

When I met Nayuki later, I thought of telling her about Ayu, but as she talked about how she took strawberry parfait as her goals and thrived, I forgot to talk about it.

We had our strawberry parfait as planned.

“I’m done!”

With a clank, the spoon spun around the glass container.

Nayuki seemed satisfied.

“I’m very happy.”

Nayuki shook her body and said indulgingly.

“880 yen without tax, along with discount. Happiness is so cheap.”

“Absolutely!”

When we went out the shop, the setting sun had dyed the shopping district crimson.

“Akiko might be already back when we get home.”

“Yeah…Oh.”

At the end of the shopping district, Nayuki suddenly stopped.

There was a shop selling kid stuff. It was the one I saw in my dreams the night I came back to this town as well as where I first met Ayu.

“Yuichi, look at that.”

Nayuki pointed to a colourful glass-pebbled stand.

The glass pebbles shone under the setting sun.

Nayuki was deeply captivated by the red glass pebbles in a bottle.

“That’s so good. I want one.”

“What use is there for some glass pebbles?”

“There isn’t any use. You just take it.”

I looked at the twenty-yen sign under the bottle.

“Hm, I can buy one for you, only one.”

“Really?”

“Yes, one. Twenty yen.”

“One is enough. Thanks, Yuichi.”

Nayuki looked like a kid who just got her pocket money and held tightly the two 10 dollars I gave her as she walked to the cashier.

“Thanks for waiting~”

She came back smiling, on her hand a small, red, round pebble. Nayuki…red…round pebble…red eyes…

“What’s up, Yuichi? Did you remember anything?”

“N-Not really. Forget it. Let’s go.”

I waved my head to shake off those thoughts and paced up. These sudden impulses of sweet, sorrowful feelings trouble me.

The setting sun had slid off the streets.

Back home, we found that Akiko had not yet returned.

“What’s wrong? She didn’t say anything about it this morning.”

“Let’s change first and wait for her.”

Not long after, while we went down to the living room, the phone rang.

“Hello, this is the Minase’s…oh, mum.”

It was Akiko, obviously.

“Yeah. Yuichi and I went to the shopping district today, so…oh, I see. It’s fine. Okay, don’t push yourself too hard, mum. We will close the door. Okay, so good luck~”

“So?”

“My mum said she’s suddenly very busy and will be late today. She might even have to work over the night there.”

“I see.”

“She said she couldn’t let herself to allow me to stay by myself. But it’s fine if you’re with me.”

“Eh…okay, I understand.”

I scratched my cheeks. It was fine if there should be any burglars, but wouldn’t Akiko be worried about something else?

Although we were cousins, for a young boy and young girl to stay overnight in the same house…

“So let me cook dinner. You can have a glimpse at my specialty in cooking.”

It seemed it wasn’t only Akiko who would be worried.

Nayuki gestured a hard-working pose, seemingly energetic.

Oh, forget it. I could do this much.

“You would help me, Yuichi, right?”

“Okay. Talking about cooking, I once took the soup left in cup noodles as clear soup. Now, tell me what to do.”

"I'll tell you after I finish making dinner. You only need to set up the dishes."

Nayuki heaved a sigh and took Akiko's apron.

I lay on the sofa in the living room, watching television.

Nayuki's voice came from the kitchen occasionally.

"Yuichi, do you like adding peppers to burdocks?"

"I'm fine with that, just not too much."

"Which hotpot soup do you like—vinegar or miso?"

"Will you throw cream in if it's miso?"

"I will if you like."

"Throw it in, then."

"Sure."

When the house was filled with aroma, I couldn't help going to the kitchen for a look.

"It's almost done~"

In her apron, Nayuki said without even turning around. How adorable. I'm tempted to embrace her from behind and make her squeal.

"Woah!"

W-What the heck was on my mind?

"Nayuki, dishes!"

"I haven't prepared salad. Do you want some?"

"No. I mean give the dishes I have to set up to me. I have a strong desire to work."

"Although I don't really get you, the plates and dishes are put in the right cupboard."

"Good."

I began setting up the dishes with clanking sounds, extremely wavered about that flash of sweetness I had imagined.

Nayuki who didn't know my waver came, holding a earthenware pot with cat-patterned thermal mittens and placing it on the thermal stove I had put on the table.

"Okay, done~"

When we opened the lid, white smoke buffed out. Chicken, mushrooms, and the like swam around the miso soup. There were also burdocks and cold spinaches on the table.

"Thanks for the food."

I first tried the burdocks that were on the side. The taste was to my liking, as spicy as I wanted.

“Delicious.”

“Cream is also added into the hotpot, so it’s delicious too.”

Nayuki poured me one bowl with a big ceramic soupspoon. Its taste was thick, and hot that warms my whole body. Touched, I had another bowl.

“Eat more, but save some for mum.”

“Oh, of course.”

Since I came here, this was the first time we had dinner only by the two of us.

“Mum’s still working, I guess.”

Nayuki said while blowing the hot tofu.

“She’s so hard-working and great. I can’t imagine how she can work and at the same time take care of things at home so well.”

“Absolutely. Mum is the person I feel proud of the most.”

Nayuki looked at the empty seat usually occupied by Akiko.

“Mum taught me how to make this hotpot too.”

“That’s why it’s so delicious.”

“But I used my own way as well.”

“Yes, yes.”

Half-finished, Nayuki suddenly stood up.

“It’s snowing again.”

With that said, she opened the curtains on the other side of the living room.

Looking outside, we could see falling snow among the courtyard dyed white by the reflection of the snow.

“What a scene to look at while eating hotpot.”

“Yuichi, you’re too young to say something so old. But this really is a scene.”

It was snowing outside, yet in front of us a boiling hotpot. Seeing I was almost finished, Nayuki happily said that it was delightful for me to have enjoyed it.

After dinner, we ate oranges while watching television in the living room.

“Yuichi, the bathing water is ready.”

“Okay.”

Standing up, I carelessly let something slip from my mouth, “Somehow it looks like we’re newly weds.”

“What?!”

Nayuki’s face turned red instantly. Seeing her face, I felt embarrassed too.

“Um, I don’t mean anything weird.”

“I understsand.”

“I’m off, then.”

“Please do so.”

Anyway, the bath today made me a bit dizzy.

After bathing, I returned to the living room, finding Nayuki napping on the sofa.

“Nayuki, go back to your room if you want to sleep. You’d get a cold. Hey, Nayuki.”

I gently moved her shoulders.

“Yes…”

Nayuki then grabbed me by the hand like a spoiled child, wanting to scratch her cheeks with my hand.

Her cheeks were soft.

“Na-Nayuki…”

“Yes…Mum…”

I see.

Asleep, She took me as her mother. I laughed, in relief as well as in a bit of regret.

“It’s me, Yuchi. Okay, Nayuki, time for you to get up. If you really sleep here, I don’t think I can wake you up.”

“Okay…oh, sorry~”

Nayuki seemed to have understood the situation and slowly pushed herself up from the sofa.

“I’m going to take a bath and sleep too.”

“Go ahead.”

Left alone, I thought of how soothing it would be to drink milk after a bath, so I opened the refrigerator. Despite the small number of residents, the refrigerator in the house was very large, as Akiko, an expert in cooking, would put in not only ingredients for basic meals but also jam and

other stuff she had made herself. In the centre of the refrigerator I found a set of burdock and spinach wrapped meticulously with a plastic wrap. Two sushi rolls were also made and neatly placed on the trolley beside the refrigerator.

Nayuki made them, no doubt. She must have thought of how tired Akiko would be when she comes in midnight or the morning after and that she could immediately grab it and eat it.

A warm sensation filled me.

Nayuki and her mother were in a good relationship, being able to support each other.

“It’s so relaxing!”

Nayuki came back after a while.

Fruit shampoo fragrance emanated from her wet, long hair. My heart was beating almost audibly.

“Hey, Yuichi, are you still awake?”

“You’re the one to talk. Isn’t it just a bit after nine?”

“It’s late. We should sleep already.”

“When do you normally sleep, I wonder?”

“Around nine.”

“Even primary kids nowadays don’t sleep that early.”

“Is that so? Ku…”

Nayuki seemed unable to restrain herself from yawning, showing her extreme sleepiness.

“You should go to the second floor and sleep.”

“Sure. What about you, Yuichi?”

“I, well…come to think of it, aren’t the lights in the bathroom flickering?”

“Seems so.”

“I’ll get back to my room after I change them. Do you have spare ones?”

“Yes. They are in the lowest box in the cupboard beside the washing machine.”

“Okay.”

“Where did that idea come from? Out of nowhere.”

“Nothing, really. Just something that bothers me.”

“…I see…”

I couldn’t possibly say anything about why I feel obliged to help her and her mother for letting me live in their house.

So I changed the light bulbs.

When I think about it, there wasn’t any need to change them in the dark night since we had already taken baths, but I still did it, quite obstinately, as it wasn’t nice to take back what I had said now.

When I came to the second floor, complete silence had enveloped the house.

Nayuki should be sleeping soundly. With that in mind, I returned to my room.

But there was one thing I didn’t know, at least back then, of course.

On that night, Nayuki couldn’t bring herself to sleep oddly.

Somehow it looks like we’re newly weds.

Nayuki repeated Yuichi’s words in her heart and rolled back and forth.

Newly weds.

Yuichi and I?

But we’re cousins.

Yuichi said that only because of the atmosphere.

And Yuichi didn’t remember something important.

Something important to Yuichi and I…

On the next morning, when I woke up and went downstairs, Akiko had already been preparing breakfast.

“Good morning, Yuchi.”

“Good morning…When did you come back, Akiko?”

“Early in the morning, about two hours ago.”

“Eh, don’t you need some sleep?”

“I took a day off today. So I’m going to sleep after I greet you and Nayuki to school.”

Akiko said while smiling, and went to the second floor to wake Nayuki up.

“Good morning~”

Nayuki went downstairs, yawning like usual, and became fully awake only after she had almost completed breakfast.

After the night, it was morning, same as ever.

The time I had with Nayuki yesterday night seemed like a dream.

But…

“Nayuki, are you still eating?”

“Yes. It’s fine. We won’t be late.”

“What you say fine couldn't be believed. Here, let me help you gulp that down.”

I took the cat-printed cup, stood up, one hand on my waist, and drank Nayuki’s coffee in one gulp.

“Ah.”

Nayuki lifted her head to look at me. Hey, what are you complaining? While I was thinking of saying that, Nayuki lowered her head in embarrassment.

Then I realised myself.

I just met my lips with Nayuki’s through the cup.

Was this what they call an indirect kiss?

“Good! Let’s go, then, Nayuki.”

“Sure!”

We used extravagantly simple and swift movements to take our bags, put on our shoes, and leave the house.

Tilting her head, Akiko saw us off, smiling.

Speaking of which…

“What work does Akiko do?”

While waking (and sometimes running a few steps), I asked Nayuki.

“What is it…”

“Hmm?”

“Actually, I’m not sure as well.”

Nayuki didn’t look as if she was joking. Probably she had complete trust in Akiko that she didn’t really care to ask even when she didn’t know.

“It doesn’t really matter, anyway.”

Simply the fact that Akiko looked so young despite being Nayuki’s mother was enough mystery that couldn’t be understood.

But she was kind and good in cooking, so nothing about her bothered me.

I didn’t further pursue asking about her affairs.

In this world, there are many things better off remaining unknown.

Chapter 4 - Snow Rabbit

Looking down from the window of the library, I could see the track team about to return after their practice.

There were around twelve to thirteen people, forming a circle for a notice meeting, in which Nayuki was standing in front.

Nayuki looked serious even for things like contacts and reminders, like an entirely different person from the one I always see sleeping and “ku”ing.

She really had the looks of a captain.

“Thank you for the hard work.”

“Thank you for your hard work too.”

At last, energetic voices came into the library even when the windows were closed. The club members returned to the club building eventually. I took my bag and also Nayuki’s and staggered out of the library.

Beside the club building, Nayuki, having changed, came out just in time.

“Oh, Yuichi.”

She saw me immediately and came running. Silently, I handed her her bag and walked alongside.

“Nayuki-senpai, is that your boyfriend?”

A girl’s voice came from behind. It seemed she was trying to make a joke.

“We’re cousins, silly.”

Nayuki turned around and smiled. Then her juniors bid her farewell and left.

“Thank you for the hard work~~”

“You two suit each other, senpai~~”

“Wish you happiness~~”

“Hey, is it fine to be teased by your juniors?”

Still facing frontwards, I pointed backwards with my thumb.

“We’re a sports club, but our relationship is extremely good. So don’t worry~”

That wasn’t what I meant.

I wanted to ask whether it was fine if her juniors took me as your boyfriend.

Well, we did go to school together every day, and even almost returning home every day now, so it was all too natural, so…it was fine if she didn't deny it.

"How's your studying going?"

Nayuki changed the topic without noticing the mood.

I shook my head.

"So it's hard to catch up the syllabus, certainly."

Lately, I had been staying at the library alone after school to catch up what I hadn't learnt after changing schools, but it didn't go really well, especially when I came across those subjects like Old Japanese Literature and English which I was originally bad at. I couldn't really put myself into studying even when I had opened the book.

"If you put some more effort, you'll catch up really quick, I know, Yuichi."

"It'll be great if that's the case."

"Work hard~"

Nayuki gestured her little, usual winning position.

But on the following day, the cruel exam assailed me suddenly.

"Right. We only have the term exam and no mid-term exams in the third semester usually, but we decided to have one this time…"

Before the teacher had finished, waves of chatter overthrew the classroom.

"Silence! This exam is for reference for further studies or work next year, so everyone has to put their all into it. Well, that's it for today."

Giving the timetable for the exam and saying minimally what he had, the teacher left the classroom and ended the class meeting as if escaping.

"For real?"

I couldn't help collapsing onto the table.

"Exams are nasty~"

Hearing Nayuki's voice, I lifted my head and nodded impotently.

"I thought there was only a term exam in the third semester, so I hadn't been studying at all lately."

"Rats."

Kitagawa, sitting at the back, also chipped in.

"It's like a pop quiz."

Kaori also held her wrists in dissatisfaction.

"And we're having world history on the first day. Memorising is the thing I hate the most."

"For me, I'm no good save Modern Literature and English."

Kitagawa held his head; Nayuki heaved sighs; For me…

"The school is torturing transfer students through this exam!"

Then, I let go of my spirit and cried out loud.

"Oh, right, Kaori, teach me~"

Turning to Kaori, Nayuki clasped her hands and said.

"I think it's more efficient to study by yourself than letting someone else teach you."

"But there are so many things I don't understand. Don't you think so too, Yuichi and Kitagawa?"

"Of course."

The two of us boys nodded in unison.

"Hmm…So let's go to the library together after school. Do you have any club activities, Nayuki?"

"Yes, but I'll quickly end it and go to the library."

With that, we decided to start our studying group.

"Kaori, thank you very much. I owe you one."

"It's too much to say you owe me, Nayuki."

Then Kaori said she wanted to make a phone call and left. I asked Nayuki, "Is Kaori the sort of person good at studies?"

"She has been number one of the academic year."

"Woah!"

"She has been number once since grade one. She's that outstanding."

"Waaa."

It shocked me initially, but when we talked about it, it didn't occur to me all that weird. Kaori was mature among us, giving an impression of being informed of everything.

"It sheds some hope if Kaori's teaching."

"Absolutely. Work hard~"

But once we started I found Kaori was extremely strict.

"Aizawa, the meaning will be entirely different if you don't translate this *what*."

"So to speak, a guild means a community between industrialists and businessmen in the Middle Ages, which has nothing to do with the time before Christ was born, Kitagawa."

She looked at the English I was doing and the world history Kitagawa was doing and at the same time showed no quarter in solving our problems.

"Phew."

Kitagawa and I heaved sighs and lowered our head at the same time.

"Kaori-sensei, that's too harsh~"

"It'll be a miracle if I can get a grade similar to Kaori's."

"A miracle?"

Lightly furrowing her brows, Kaori looked at me.

"It's called a miracle because it doesn't happen."

"..."

"If you work hard, Aizawa, you can get a good grade without hoping for any miracles."

"It'll be great if that's the case."

"So work hard on the next question."

"Eh..."

Before Nayuki returned from her club activities, this was roughly the situation among the three of us.

I photocopied Kaori's notes and returned home.

Having finished my dinner and taken a bath, I, though having placed the photocopied notes on the table, had no progress whatsoever.

"Sigh..."

It was better studying at the library. If there wasn't anyone to watch me studying and stimulate me, I couldn't bring myself to doing it.

Nayuki should still be studying, I guess.

I looked at the alarm clock beside my pillow. She should now be in deep sleep. Although I had questions in English I wanted to ask her, I could only wait till the next day. Let me just sleep now.

But then the door was knocked.

"Yuichi, Can I come in?"

"Sure."

In her pajamas, Nayuki walked into the room.

“Good evening.”

“What’s up? For you to come in this late.”

It was about midnight, a time familiar to me but a miracle for Nayuki to still be awake.

“How’s preparations for exams going?”

“No dice. No any exaggeration here.”

“Me too…”

“Sigh…”

Nayuki and I heaved another sigh, adding up to our mountain of sighs accumulated this day.

“I feel more comfortable with studying with everybody at the library.”

“Me too.”

“So now probably it’ll be better if there’s two instead of one.”

“Probably…”

“Let’s study together, Yuichi.”

Was that fine? Akiko was here today, but for us two to be in the same room at midnight…

“Yuichi, does it trouble you?”

“No. Right, I have questions to ask you anyway.”

“Absolutely!”

“Come to my room: I have a table as well as sitting mats for studying there," Nayuki spoke. Accepting her invitation, I took my notes and revision materials and left my room.

Anyway, let me study and dismiss all those weird, useless thoughts.

I had have seen her room from the outside several times, but this was the first I had entered.

The size and the accessories should be similar to mine, but a girl’s room was just *that* different. Many glamorous alarm clocks, bright-coloured curtains and bed covers catch my eyes. A thin fragrance resembling Nayuki’s shampoo floated in the room.

“Sit down. Make yourself comfortable.”

I sat down on the flower-patterned mat she gave me, a bit in embarrassment.

“So let’s begin.”

Nayuki immediately opened the textbook and began reading. I also decided to tackle English, the subject I was bad at the most, taking the English textbook with one hand and the dictionary with the other.

“...Yuichi~”

But not even after five minutes did Nayuki start to make depressed moans, distracting my attention flatly.

“What’s wrong?”

“...I’m sleepy.”

Nayuki rubbed her eyes and scratched her chin like a cat.

“Sleepy? Didn’t you just start studying?”

“But I’m sleepy.”

So I had been right about concentrating. But it seemed more than impossible for someone that had to sleep up to ten hours every day. While Nayuki spoke lackadaisically, her eyelids looked like sticking together.

“Hey!”

If Nayuki slept now, I would be tempted to sleep as well.

“Wake me up if I happen to fall asleep in the middle of studying.”

“When that happens, I’ll doodle on your face.”

“Please don't pull any pranks on someone sleeping.”

“If you don’t want it, concentrate and work hard.”

But Nayuki seemed to be giving no response now.

“...Ku~~”

Whack.

I rolled the answer sheet and hit her head.

“Ouch.”

“I will hit you again if you start sleeping.”

“Wuu...”

Then the two of us repeated the sounds of “Ku...” and “Whack!”, while working hard.

“That’s too much. My head hurts.”

“Because you’re sleeping.”

"Because I want to sleep."

"I want to sleep too."

It had been two hours already since we began.

"Get a hold of yourself. You can go through it, Nayuki."

"...Yes. Work hard. Oh...Ku..."

Whack.

We continued to work hard afterwards, but as we seemed to be trapped hikers on a snow mountain, we soon thought sleep was more important than studying, so I decided to end it.

"So that's it for today. If we push ourselves too much the first day, we can't do anything the day after."

"Are we still studying tomorrow?"

"Eh, yes, if you're willing."

"I want to do my best...with you, "Nayuki agreed with a sleepily, vague voice, "like the way we did in the past..."

"In the past?"

You have forgotten it, haven't you?

Nayuki's eyes spoke with loneliness but of a similar tone.

"We once did our winter break assignment together. And we also opened our textbooks in my room...it's that year you last came to our house. Whenever I said I wanted to sleep you would get angry."

"..."

I tried to imagine what it would be like for my young self to be sitting opposed to Nayuki like this, but it didn't resemble anything in my memory. Memories that could almost be connected vanished like white dust in a snap.

"I'm sorry for saying such weird stuff."

I shook my head.

What is this? My memories will come at unexpected times, yet when I try to recall them they vanish.

When I first came back to this town, the mere idea of recalling those memories would distress me.

Now having lost of the precious memories I had with Nayuki, however, I got infuriated of myself. I really wanted to recall them for Nayuki—for the feelings I had towards her.

"I am sure that there are sorrowful memories~"

Nayuki spoke quietly, as if she knew what I was having in mind.

“Sorrowful things happened. They crush your heart when you put them into your heart. They are too sorrowful that it pains you to the point to shut your memories.”

“Nayuki…”

Did she reall know of what happened to me the last year I came to this town?

“These sorrowful things may have happened.”

Nayuki started to make them unclear, in a certain way.

It’s your job to recall them. I’m waiting for you to remember them, Yuichi.

During a short silence, I could hear her heart speaking.

“Work hard in your exams.”

Nayuki returned to her original face and smiled.

“Yeah. I have to.”

“So good night.”

“Good night.”

Though sleepy, I couldn’t really sleep when I returned to my room.

They are too sorrowful that it pains you to the point to shut your memories.

Still, I need to remember what things they were.

During daybreak, it seemed to snow again.

The school in the day glittered by the white and shiny snow.

Nayuki and I ran on the snow with a speed we would almost collapse.

“*Pant*…*pant*…”

“We…seem to have…got in time…right…”

“…yeah…”

I couldn’t really speak while panting. For working too late yesterday night, the two of us both slept overtime this morning.

The first lesson is physical education today. As we had to change our clothes before the lesson, the time allowed was even shorter than usual. I scurried to the entrance, but Nayuki kneeled at a corner of the school.

“What’s wrong? Does your stomach ache?”

“No.”

Looking closely, I saw Nayuki playing with a snow rabbit on the grass field.

“Do you even have time for this?”

“I didn’t make this, but…”

The snow rabbit seemed to be kicked by passing, unaware students, who wrecked it appearance. Half of its white body was smudged with dirt footprints.

Nayuki removed the dirt carefully and gathered the fallen snow back together.

“Do we still have time for that?”

“But this is a poor snow rabbit.”

Nayuki didn’t wear any gloves, so her hands became red from touching the snow. Simply looking at the snow makes one feel cold, but Nayuki worked with them as if she didn’t mind.

Even when it was artificial, Nayuki couldn’t let herself to leave it alone.

“What a bother. Let me help.”

It was even bothering for me to have no resistance to Nayuki when she looked like that.

“Thank you, Yuichi.”

“I’m helping because you’re fidgeting: at your own pace the first lesson will be over when you have finished it.”

Then the two of us gathered the snow into a hill, made it into an oval, and inserted a leaf as its ears, as well as putting a red fruit on it as its eye.

“Okay, we’re done.”

“But it’s missing an eye on the other side.”

The other fruit may have been kicked far away.

“I know!”

Nayuki reached into her pocket and took out a red glass pebble.

It was the one I bought her at the shopping district.

“Yuichi, can we use this on the little rabbit?”

“Do you rock around with this wherever you go?”

“…Because you bought it for me.”

Nayuki bit her lips in embarrassment. Rats, she was adorable. I got elated, yet I wanted to run off and hide myself.

“So even when it’s something important…the little snow rabbit…”

Nayuki stopped in the middle of her speech.

“It doesn’t bother me.”

I understood Nayuki’s personality, I should say.

“It’s a poor rabbit if it only has one eye.”

“Absolutely! Thank you, Yuichi.”

The snow rabbit we made was finally complete with the new flashy eye.

Snow rabbit.

Speaking of which, there was a red-eyed snow rabbit in my last memories of that day.

But it didn’t felt like a depressing memory.

No, it might be depressing, but it was of a gentleness that cures.

No way. My memories escaped again.

“The size doesn’t really match. Don’t you think so?”

Nayuki said, looking at the snow rabbit.

“Meh, don't care about those things.”

I said monotonously to prevent her from noticing my feeling.

“You’re right.”

Then a sound came from the changing room.

“Hey, Aizawa. What’re you doing?”

It’s Kitagawa having changed his physical education uniform. Oh, no.

“Quick, Nayuki!”

“Absolutely!”

We dashed to the classroom. Paying no heed to the fatigue accumulated from running to school, we dashed around the school, spent three seconds to change our clothes and ran back to lesson.

“You look energetic, Aizawa. Have you finished your warm-up exercises already?”

After the physical education teacher’s remark, my classmates laughed, but I was too tired to even reply.

“By the way, we’re having a marathon today. I look forward to you running, Aizawa.”

For real?

The painful memories of the marathon thus shut all other memories I had during the lessons.

“Yuichi, you had been sleeping through class the entire day.”

Well, you can put it like that too.

“Because I didn’t sleep well yesterday night, and I got tired from running.”

“So what should we do about staying here and studying today?”

Asked by Kaori, I considered it for a while and replied, “I…I’ll pass for today. Please do help me tomorrow if I can make it.”

“Sure thing.”

Kaori seemed jovial to pretend a strict teacher. “So let me *lecture* Kitagawa today”, with that said, she took Kitagawa, who looked obviously helpless, along with her.

“I’m heading off to my club.”

“It’s really tiring to have club activities even before the exams, isn’t it?”

“The exams came so suddenly, that is…”

Biding me farewell, Nayuki also left the classroom. I then left school by myself.

Although I was tired, I didn’t want to head directly home and rest.

My legs guided me to the shopping district.

I could feel it already on the first time we met.

The girl there was the key to call upon my memories.

“Two taiyakis…no four.”

“Sure. It’s just been baked.”

I took over the brown bag from the old man in the shop.

“Your taiyakis are great.”

“It’s great if you like it. Thank you.”

“I only know this place because of the girl who always came here and bought taiyakis for me. Do you remember? That small girl with wings hanging on her bag.”

“Yes. I’m familiar with that girl.”

The old man nodded his head incessantly. Anyone would remember a person who ate without paying.

“She usually comes during the evening. She haven’t appeared today, though.”

“Is that so?”

“That child says the taiyaki I make has the taste in her memories. She also said the first time she ate this was given by her good friend when they were small. I’m happy to hear her say this.”

Feeling good upon hearing that, I nodded and left the taiyaki shop.

Chilly wind coursed across the shopping district. I took out a taiyaki from the warm, cozy bag and had a bite.

At this moment…

“It looks delicious, Yuichi.”

As if summoning a spell, Ayu was beside me, coming from nowhere.

“Of course, my tactics of fishing Ayu[2] with Taiyaki worked.”

“Is there such a way of saying that?”

“Don’t care about the details. Do you want one?”

“Sure!”

Ayu took the taiyaki with her mittens and started munching while saying its delicious.

As we ate, we walked naturally to the end of the shopping district, an open space.

We also ate our taiyakis there when we first met.

“Is Nayuki-chan not with you today?”

“She has club activities.”

“What kind?”

“The track team. Her looks don’t seem so, but she’s the captain.”

“Sounds awesome.”

“But exams are coming, so I don’t think she can really put her heart into running.”

By the way— before I could switch the topic, Ayu struck first.

“The name *Nayuki* sounds nice.”

“Who do you think messed it up with something edible?”

“Ugu…you bully.”

“Why do you keep on saying stuff about Nayuki.”

“Because…”

Ayu gave a complicated look of embarrassment and helplessness.

“You seem to cherish her, Yuichi. And whenever you talk about her, you look cheerful…ouch.”

I lightly hit her head.

“You don’t seem to be a person who would trouble yourself with other people.”

“Ugu…but you don’t have to hit me for that…”

“You’re noisy.”

I wanted to end this topic quicker because I noticed my face becoming a bit red.

“So to speak, we first met when I came to this street at the beginning of this month, for you stole taiyakis and I was your accessory after the fact.

“Accessory after the fact? What is that?”

“A person who could only join because he got himself involved in a crime.”

I explained for myself.

“Ugu…I have got in good terms with the old man.”

“I know. So what I wanted to say wasn’t that.”

I returned to the topic anew seriously.

“We should only have known since this month. But when I first met you, I had a strong feeling of nostalgia.”

“Yuichi…”

Ayu’s eyes widened. I took the last two taiyakis in the bag, gave one to Ayu, and one for myself.

“This taiyaki…this small girl…and the colour of this sky.”

I lifted my head and gazed at the grey winter sky in this snowy town. At the evening, however, the cloud layers would separate and reveal the beautiful setting sun. The tilted light rays during dusk painted the sky a faint red.

Ayu’s cheeks and the white wings behind her were also dyed with a faint orange.

“Ayu, I have seen you before, haven’t I?”

I stared at her.

A door deep in my heart was opened at the spot.

During the winter I came to this town for the last time…

I met this young girl at this shopping district.

When I went to buy things with Nayuki, I saw a girl crying and called towards her. And I bought taiyakis to comfort her. Then we went off together to play, and Nayuki got angry.

“You told me several times you would wait for me.”

Right.

Why couldn't I remember? I became close to the girl from then on, and I left Nayuki alone in that year. Didn't I play only with that girl every day? Didn't I look at the dusk of this town every day? But this girl...along with Nayuki...

"I once said I'm searching for something in this street, right?"

Ayu didn't answer my question.

"Ayu."

The door to my memories was shut once again. Impatient, I grabbed her by the arms, and she continued, "It was something extremely important. Although it is at a direction different from my school, I still come to look for it."

"I..."

I let go of her arms.

I wanted to recall those past events. Nayuki said it was painful memories, so I had to retrieve them myself and not from others.

"It'll be great if you can find what you looking for."

I said.

"Yes."

Ayu smiled, but it was a smile different from her usual energetic one. It was illusory, as if it was going to vanish eventually in the dusk.

Chapter 5 - Present

A boy was crying alone on the long bench in front of the station.

That boy was I.

Since I was looking at that child, I thought, I was in a dream.

That boy—Yuichi, had been rubbing his eyes with that back of his hand repeatedly while choking with sobs for some considerable time.

Something depressing happened, and Yuichi couldn't do anything to help. The only thing a helpless child could do in this situation was to cry repeatedly.

How long had he been crying? When evening arrived, pedestrians passing the station increased, and it started snowing.

"...I finally found you."

Yuichi, with his head lowered and his eyes vague with tears, saw a pair of girl's shoes. Looking up, he saw long braids, hands red by the cold, and on those hands a white snow rabbit.

It was Nayuki.

"I had been looking for you since you didn't come home."

"…"

"I have something I want to show you."

She showed Yuichi the snow rabbit on her hands.

"Look. This is called a snow rabbit."

Nayuki forced a smile towards the crying Yuichi.

"I made this. I'm not that good at making it, so I spent a lot of time and with all my effort."

Yuichi hadn't been playing with Nayuki for almost this whole winter. He only did an assignment with her, and then he went off and played with another girl. Nayuki was lonely, for sure. Now Nayuki was still crying for that girl. Nayuki should know well. But even so…

"Could you take it, Yuichi?"

In her hands, the slowly melting snow rabbit gleamed with its red eyes like tears.

"I know you'll be going back tomorrow, so we won't be seeing each other for a while. But when spring comes, followed by summer, and then autumn, when this street starts snowing again…" Nayuki bended her body, looking at my face suggestively, "…you'll come and see me again, won't you?"

"…"

"What I have prepared now may look simple, but this my present for you, Yuichi."

"…"

"Although…I couldn't find a way to say it…I always had…been in love with…"

Knock, knock.

Knocking sounds woke me up.

"…Yuichi? Have you slept already?"

"No. I'm still awake."

I didn't plan to sleep. After dinner, I decided to lie down for a nap while waiting for the bath, but I seemed to have fallen asleep.

"We have to prepare for the exams today, you remember?"

"Yeah. I'll go there now. Please wait for me."

“Certainly.”

I couldn’t, however, look at Nayuki’s face directly now after having had that dream.

“We’re doing science subjects today. Work hard~”

With that said, she held the mechanical pencil decorated with a large cat accessory.

“Nayuki, I’ve always been curious. Won’t that mechanical person be hard to use?”

The round, fat cat looked heavy.

“A bit.”

“It looks extremely hard to use.”

“That’s not the case. I like it very much.”

“Really?”

“…eh. I thought you would say something like ‘are you using it to train your shoulders?’”

“You’ve grown smart, haven’t you?”

After that dream, I was deprived of the energy to refute or make a joke.

After that, we kept silent in our reading for a while.

Since I took a nap, I wasn’t that sleepy.

Nayuki too. Sometimes she would “Ku…”, but when I hit her, she looked like she had now been more accustomed to staying late.

“Phew…”

After some while, I heaved a sigh.

“Have you got tired?”

“I want to take a break.”

“Let’s go to a place to freshen ourselves.”

Nayuki stood up and opened the door to the balcony, waving to tell me to follow her.

Carefully, I walked out to the balcony. Though I was wearing a pair of slippers, it was slippery on the frozen ice. I almost slipped and fell down, allowing Nayuki to see my silly posture.

“Let’s go back.”

“We’ve just come out.”

Nayuki smiled.

I could see, rarely, the beautiful moon tonight.

The gardens and the houses below and beyond the balcony were twinkling with covered white snow.

Nayuki's long black hair looked beautiful too under the moonlight.

"Braids…Do you don't tie them any longer?"

Words slipped, without much care.

"Braids?"

"You tied braids before, when I was a still a primary kid."

"Do you remember them now?"

Nayuki suddenly lifted her head.

"Yeah."

With that said, I couldn't stop myself from tracing those memories.

"Snow rabbits…and the girl with braids who made a snow rabbit for me."

"I see…"

"I have to apologise to that girl. Still, even when she made a snow rabbit for me, I…"

"I'm really an idiot~"

Turning away from me, Nayuki stopped me.

"For holding on to the past…"

Nayuki's shoulders shivered, maybe from the cold weather or from something else.

"I'm sorry."

I couldn't help but embrace her from behind. A warm, soft girl's body.

"Sorry, Nayuki…I…"

"You don't have to apologise to me, Yuichi, for I'm an idiot."

Nayuki felt like a good-tempered cat, staying still to let me hold her.

"No, I mean, I want to apologise, but that's not the only thing, I…"

I couldn't believe a sense of nervousness would thrash in me. I closed my eyes, and slowly opened them again. Then I summoned my courage and said, "I think, I love you, Nayuki."

I could feel in my arms that Nayuki's body tensed. I couldn't scare her. I loosened the embrace of my shoulders so as to let her go away if she wanted.

Still, Nayuki kept like that, remaining silent.

"I hated this town when I first came back. Neither did I want to remember anything in the past. But I soon started to think otherwise, because you were with me. So I want to pick up those memories I had with you."

"So you remembered them?"

I nodded.

"...That's rude."

In my arms, Nayuki said softly. I froze to her words. Though serene, her words meant denial.

She lightly escaped from my embrace and swung her head along with her hair around to me.

"It's rude to say this stuff now."

I was struck speechless.

"...I don't understand. I don't understand what you're suddenly saying to me..."

Nayuki lowered her head, cowering. Her slim body looked, now, very small.

The winter chilly air froze the two of us.

"...Let's get back to our rooms."

"Yeah."

Of course, there was no way we could continue studying now. I said goodbye, conducted some useless conversation softly and left, taking my stationery. I turned around to Nayuki again and whispered, "Sorry."

On the following day, when I went to the living room to have breakfast, Nayuki had already left the house.

"She said she didn't have time to practice after school because of the exams, so she left earlier for the practice."

Despite it came from Akiko, I knew at the spot it was a lie.

It was only an excuse to avoid me.

This was the first time I went to school alone since living in their house.

During lunch break, even though the few of us went to the cafeteria for lunch as usual, the only thing I said with Nayuki was "Do you want jam?" and "Yes". Kaori and Kitagawa, seeing our interaction, looked at each other.

"Aizawa, are you studying today? Nayuki said she'd be going to her club."

"If you don't come, I'll be the only person to be scolded by Kaori-sensei."

What they said after school implied that if something had happened, I could consult them when Nayuki was not around.

But I couldn't accept their invitation.

"Sorry, I think I'll pass too for today."

"Aizawa, if you're bothered by something about Nayuki..."

Before Kaori could finish, I shook my head, smiling. Having told them that I would be leaving, I left them in the classroom, wondering what a secluded, typical dump man I was and drooped my head.

How ironic.

I tried to open my closed memory for the feelings I had towards Nayuki, but when it just came back to me, she rejected it.

I staggered to the station.

The clock tower, the rings around it, and the wooden bench.

It was the bench I sat and cried in my dreams.

Speaking of which, this was where I waited for Nayuki a few weeks when I came back to this town.

I sat on the bench.

Although my dream ended when Nayuki was giving the snow rabbit to Yuichi, I eventually remembered of what happened later.

"Although...I couldn't find a way to say it...I always had...been in love with..."

you, Yuichi~ Yuichi should have heard what Nayuki had said.

But on that instant, the snow rabbit Nayuki gave him was thrown on the ground, destroyed.

The leaf-made ear was bended, the red eyes rolled to one side: the snow rabbit was crushed into just another pile of snow.

"...oh, I'm so-sorry..."

Nayuki forced herself to use the most normal tone and to show a smile in this awkward situation.

"So Yuichi, you've come to hate snow~"

The person who brushed away Nayuki's present on the ground with his hand was none other than Yuichi.

Nayuki said, trembling, focusing her eyes on what was left of the snow rabbit.

No.

You had done nothing wrong, Nayuki.

I would have said that, if you let me say it now, but I was filled with grief at that time, and had no mental capacity to say anything for Nayuki.

I was only focused in grieving, in such despair I hoped the whole town, along with the snow, with all the happy memories, and whatever related would have never happened.

“Yuichi.”

Even then, Nayuki said gently to Yuichi.

Even when Nayuki was allergic to cats, she embraced cats without giving in any mind because she loves them. Probably this was the same reason why she still smiled to Yuichi even when her snow rabbit was rejected.

“No matter what happened, I still want to repeat what I said. So please give me a moment, only a moment before you leave...”

Despite her obvious smile, a streak of tears came down her face.

“Can you come here again tomorrow and see me? And can I give you a goodbye?”

Yuchi didn’t reply.

“I’ll be here...always waiting for you, Yuichi.”

Still, I didn’t came back to Nayuki’s and just left the town.

She must have drowned in sorrow. Given the circumstances, even she would have come to hate me. She may have thought it troubling for me to come back suddenly. But because of what she was, she came to greet me as if nothing had happened and treated me with her usual kindness.

Then I was again captivated by her.

I was such a bastard. With that thought in mind, I felt someone in front of me.

“Is it you, Nayuki?!”

Abruptly I lifted my head, but there, standing, was just a girl I had never seen. Probably she saw me crying like a fool, so she just stood there, looking at me worriedly.

Her mother somewhere away called her back to her side. I grinned to the girl. Freaked out, the girl smiled back to me, feeling assured, and ran back to her mother.

It was also time for me to head back...

Having delved myself into depression long enough, I stood up from the bench at last.

When I opened the door to the house, the phone started ringing. As no one else seemed to be around, I picked up the call.

“Is it you, Yuichi?”

It was Akiko.

“I’m sorry. Actually, I’m very occupied with work today, so...I’ll probably have to come back tomorrow morning.”

“Ah…I see.”

So am I going to stay with just Nayuki for the night…in this situation?

“I believe it’s fine since I’ve left dinner to Nayuki, but I’ve prepared some in the refrigerator. So you can heat them and have some~”

“I understand.”

“Thank you for helping out.”

“…okay.”

To tell the truth, I had no confidence in helping out, but I couldn’t let her worry.

It was simple to heat food with the microwave oven and easy even for someone as bad in cooking as I, so I quickly set up the food and ate dinner early.

It was only several days since I had eaten with Nayuki food she made, and here, also.

It seemed I could never eat hotpot as delicious as that one.

Though once frozen, food Akiko prepared was superb. But when I ate it alone, it occurred tasteless.

When I was almost finished, I left a note for Nayuki on the table.

Akiko don't seem to be coming back today. I have finished my dinner. Yuichi.

It sounded pale, but I had wrote everything needed.

Having climbed to the second floor, I lay flat on the bed.

I had hardly spoken anything with Nayuki for this entire day.

Would this continue till spring? Then everything would be meaningless. Should I wait for tomorrow, say an apology to Nayuki and remain cousins?

…How could anyone just change their feelings immediately?

Rolling around and glancing at the table, I found the mountain of books I hadn’t touched.

If I stayed like this, my exam starting tomorrow would…

“Yipes!”

In a shriek, I sprang up. Was it really tomorrow?!

“I’m a goner.”

Even if I start now, everything was too late. But I still decided to revise some of the subjects I was good at. Studying was also a nice way to turn away from thinking about Nayuki. Even when I heard her voice, I remained in my room and, quite rarely, concentrated in front of the table.

Then, after some time…

Having heard knocking sounds, I opened the door.

But there was no one there.

When I got back into the room, those knocking sounds came again.

What?

Looking closesly, I could see, on the balcony beyond the half-opened curtains, Nayuki was standing there, puffing white air. So the balcony was connected to this room and Nayuki's.

I immediately opened the door to the balcony.

"Can I come in?"

"Please come in now. It's cold, isn't it?"

I couldn't stop myself from wanting to embrace her shoulders with my hand, but I suppressed myself in a flurry and refrained.

"This is my first time coming to your room. I thought it would be very messy, but it's the opposite."

"There wasn't really much to take out. Everything's still inside the paper box."

"I see."

"Take a seat anywhere you like…but there's not even a mat around. Okay, I don't mind you sitting on my bed."

"Okay."

Nayuki sat on the edge of the bed. I then sat leaning on the back of the chair.

Silence.

If she came in uninvited, she should have had something to talk about, but she just sat there, still and silent.

Unable to bear the atmosphere, I tried finding something to talk about.

"You always wear this jacket, uh?"

Nayuki wore a cat-patterned jacket on her cat-paw-stamped pajamas.

"Because I love this jacket."

"I can guess."

"It's a jacket with kittens on it."

"I know just by seeing it."

"This kitten is called 'Strawberry', and this one 'Melon'."

Nayuki pointed to the kittens on her jacket.

“This one over here is ‘Grape’, and the one beside it ‘Cucumber’.”

“Please don’t tell me they all have names.”

“Yes, they do.”

Nayuki nodded. Every one of them had fruit names, and without any special adjectives. This was her style indeed. I couldn’t help laughing.

“Is this weird?”

She smiled, her cheeks a bit of red.

“Not at all.”

I was satisfied enough to see her smiling, at last.

But then she suddenly became serious.

“…yesterday night.”

After our conversation, she probably had the courage to talk about it. She softly gripped the hand on her knee and started talking softly.

“I was shocked yesterday night.”

“…sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologise,” Nayuki said, shaking her head.

“I’ve never thought I would be struck with such a confession. I always…I always thought you had forgotten what happened that winter.”

The chair supporting my arm creaked.

“I had once thought, once hoped it would be remembered. They were precious memories you and I had, but when you really remembered, the feeling I had at that time, occurred to me as if they happened just yesterday. I had no idea in how to react.”

“Okay.”

“I have been thinking about it, since then.”

She added a bit more strength to her gripping hand.

“Although I’m not smart, I have been thinking about it for this whole day~ I had been thinking about what the past things residing in my heart were.”

“Okay.”

I simply nodded, urging her to continue. While thinking about it, Nayuki slowly spoke her mind.

“Do I want to apologise to Yuichi? Do I need to at least help remember since Yuichi forgot about it?”

"I'm sorry."

"Then I got an answer I'm pleased with."

Her head drooped, she stared straight into me.

"Seven strawberry parfaits."

"...?"

Her eyes smiled. I must have looked stupid to her sudden declaration.

"And I'll forgive you."

forgive you for once making me wait.

I stood up from the chair.

"This is special service only for you, Yuichi."

Naturally, I sat on the bed beside Nayuki.

"Because I..."

The distance between us was enough for our hands to touch.

"I still love you...even now."

It happened together—that she gave a soft cry and that I held her.

"Yuichi."

Embraced tightly, she made sounds of not knowing what to do.

"...don't you like it?"

She made no response, but she stayed still, having no intention of backing away.

I supported her by her cheeks and let her lay down. When I close in on her, she looked at my face, her eyes wide. I smiled wryly.

"Please close your eyes."

"...okay...sure."

She slowly closed her eyes, her eyebrows trembling. We started off by lightly, and then longer, kissing.

Her lips were warm and soft. My hand on her cheeks crawled to the back of her neck and caressed her long and straight hair.

"I'm sorry for letting you wait."

I said between our two kisses, and Nayuki lightly shook her head.

"I'm…happy."

"So am I."

"I'm extremely happy to kiss you. My feelings for you have never changed. Even now, these feelings fill my body."

I couldn''t help loving her, her whole body. So let's let 'Strawberry', 'Melon' and their counterparts first stay on the side of the bed. With her cat jacket taken off, she laid on the bed in her pajamas.

Obediently she let me take care of it. I loosened the buttons and softly opened her pajamas. Under those pajamas, she had nothing on. Two round, beautifully shaped, and soft breasts suddenly came into my view. We had known each other since we were small, but when I knew her body had grown into a girl, I felt a bit dizzy, either from being touched or being tempted.

Nayuki, despite having her breasts completely seen by me, looked into a distance, as usual, at the window, without any intention.

"Yuichi."

She said, without intonation, as if speaking to herself.

"I feel very embarrassed~"

I prayed my kind look would assure her, and at the same time I touched her body, saying nothing.

"Ah…"

She twitched to her sensations. I let my hand course through her body, touching her breasts. Nayuki closed her eyes, lightly puffing, placing her hand softly on the back of my hand that was on her breasts.

"Your hands…are very warm~"

"Yes."

I meticulously, like treating things that could easily be broken, softly, and slowly touched her breasts. Her soft breasts changed shape under my hands, but whenever I let go, they immediately bounce back to their original, round shape.

"Hey…don't play with them~"

Although her shoulders were slightly trembling, she didn't appear unhappy. I continued stroking her breasts while being careful of the strength I exert. Nayuki, as her name, yuki (snow), implied, had skin as white as snow, sticking to my hand as if there was a layer of vapour. Her skin gradually flushed red.

Quietly, the pink nipple in the centre slowly erected.

"I feel very embarrassed, Yuichi…"

In this situation, even a strawberry parfait wouldn't do.

"I don't want it…but…"

But then Nayuki wriggled her body cringingly to the position I demanded.

"I trust you, Yuichi," she said, almost as if crying.

Behind her, I held her tightly. I quickly yanked the part in front of me away to prevent her from becoming more unease. Then I pulled off her panties. Her whole body was trembling from showing a part of her body not even she herself was familiar with to a man and also in a strange, gullible posture. But she pacified herself. She had ceased in resisting or saying she was embarrassed, but only gripped the sheets, keeping still. She trusted in me, preparing to accept me.

I stick my body close to Nayuki's waist. Simply her priceless reaction was enough to excite me.

"Relax."

I slowly pushed myself into her body.

"Mm…."

She bit her lips. It was narrow, but had nothing to do with her will. That body part was resisting outsiders for its first time. I slowly moved in a bid to lessen the burden on her.

"It's fine…it…doesn't hurt…"

It was impossible for it not to hurt. To tell the truth, Even I felt a bit of pain.

"Okay, Yuichi…it's fine. I…I…"

As I delved myself into syncing her feelings with mine, I eventually reached the end. Inside, something was broken by the pressure: Nayuki and I had become one.

"Is it okay if I move?"

Nayuki nodded without making any sound.

As this was her first time, Nayuki must have felt something unpleasant.

Hell, she might have been just bearing pain for all this time.

Yet Nayuki said nothing about the pain to the very end. I had felt her skin, her body, and the warmth of her heart: everything had ended.

"I love…you, Yuichi…"

Sensing the end, Nayuki said, as if she was in a dream.

The two of us lay on the bed, and embraced each other silently for a good while.

I played around with her hair, pretending to comb it with my fingers.

“Don’t keep staring at me~” Nayuki said, then lowering her head, sometimes shaking her body and moaning in my arms.

“…tonight…can I…just sleep here?”

I answered Nayuki, smiling, “But you have to wake up obediently tomorrow. If Akiko still isn’t around, tomorrow we’ll need…”

Abruptly I lowered my head in dejection.

“Right, we’ve almost forgotten after all that great stuff has happened. We have exams tomorrow…”

“Great stuff?”

Nayuki asked, neglecting my worn out look.

“Do you still have to ask?”

I embraced her tightly.

Not long after, Nayuki fell in deep sleep easily, as usual.

Even though I was really worried about the exams, I had no urge to start working now, so I let myself fall into deep sleep as well.

Then I dreamed again.

Yuichi…

Among the white world, I could only hear the sound calling forth me.

It was either mist or a whole scene of snow.

Yuichi, it’s great I’ve found it:

The important thing, as well as the important person.

Who’re you?

Among the white, fluttering canvas, I could only ask with my voice, or perhaps with my consciousness.

I have been looking at you, Yuichi.

I have always been at your side in the memories you left me.

So you won’t be lonely…so I won’t be lonely.

But it doesn’t matter any longer, does it? Yuichi.

So I’m giving the last shard of memory in my hand back to you, Yuichi.

Even if I give it back to you, you won’t cry again, right?

Even if I have to disappear from here…

Chapter 6 - Opening the Door to Her Heart

Was it a dream again?

When I opened my eyes, it was already morning.

But Nayuki who had went to sleep with me was not by my side now.

Was yesterday night only a dream as well?

“The sun is coming out~”

At this moment, Nayuki came in smiling.

“You…”

I was struck speechless.

“What happeend? You woke up earlier than me, changed earlier than me, and even…”

“Breakfast is already prepared~”

“Miracle…”

“It’s not a miracle~”

Though pouting, she talked as slow as usual.

“When mum’s not around, I’ll wake up early.”

“Okay.”

“And I’ll feel embarrassed if you see me sleeping.”

“I’m tired already of seeing your ‘ku‘ing face.”

“That’s different from how I slept this morning.”

She was so embarrassed even her neck became red. I started to remember how she looked yesterday night. But if I think too deep about it, I couldn’t imagine what would happen, so I began my morning work without saying anything.

Having changed my clothes and descended to the first floor, I found the breakfast Nayuki said she had prepared there.

Toast with strawberry jam, strawberry milk, and strawberry Yakult for dessert.

“Nayuki…hey…”

“Woah. It says the Capricorns have the worst luck today.”

Ignoring me, Nayuki watched the fortune program on the television.

"Okay, I'll make do with it."

Wolfing down the sweet and sour and even red breakfast, I was painfully reminded that Akiko was a necessity in this family.

"Good morning, Kaori."

"Oh. Good morning, Nayuki. You two are coming together back again now?"

"Yeah."

"It's great."

Kaori slapped my shoulders.

"Heh."

I tensed abruptly.

"What's wrong?"

Kaori and Nayuki looked at me and said in unison.

"...nothing."

What upset me was that I became more happy than angry when I was made fun at. I must have got some aftermath symptoms through some setbacks.

At this time, oddly, Kitagawa came into the classroom even later than Nayuki and I.

"I planned to stay up last night and study, but I somehow fell asleep and ended up almost late when I woke up."

"You're a hard-working person to stay up studying."

"Ohoh, it's my first time to be praised by Kaori-sensei."

"I'm telling you," I looked at both of them with the corner of my eyes (Shaft mode), "you two try to tease Nayuki and I whenever possible, but aren't you two getting along pretty well?"

"What..."

"Don't say such sudden weird stuff."

"Wah. Their faces have become red~"

As they continued saying, "Please stop" and "It's enough, I felt I had taken my revenge.

Then for some time I could tease them with this topic, but still, perhaps Nayuki and I couldn't prevent ourselves from being teased by them at the same time...

"Look, the teacher's coming. The exam's coming up."

Kaori said, as if heaving a sigh. We thus returned to our seats obediently.

But actually, I didn't really care when the exam was starting.

After the exam, I could probably find a place to go out with Nayuki in the weekends, or even get Kaori and Kitagawa to come along. I only left space in my mind for such joyful things.

And this serene day ended.

We were having our next exam. An unfamiliar teacher came into the classroom and said something to the supervisor.

The supervisor nodded and called Nayuki and I, telling us to hand in our exam papers immediately and go to the teacher's lounge. Our exam papers would be graded by what we had written so far.

Nayuki showed a sign of unrest, but we couldn't just bother others in their exams, so I hurried Nayuki outside the classroom.

In the lounge waiting for us was the message of Akiko involved in a car crash and had been sent to the hospital.

"How did that happen?"

I supported Nayuki, who was about to collapse.

"So let's head over to the hospital right now. We had called a taxi already."

Fazed, Nayuki said nothing, at a loss. The teacher rested his hand on my shoulder and said, "You're Minase's relative and also their family member. I hope you can work hard to be Minase's pillar."

I didn't need you to tell me.

Although we went to the hospital by car, the fastest transportation tool in this case, we had to, incidentally, pass through the place of the accident.

I moved Nayuki's head near my chest so as not to let her see the place.

Although she leaned on me, I couldn't tell whether she had seen it through her still, lifeless eyes.

The car had crashed into such an irregular shape that one couldn't tell what it originally looked like, its broken pieces of glasses scattered everywhere on the road. On top of that, the snow stacked at the side of the asphalt road was dyed with traces of red.

"...Gu..."

I couldn't stifle the stuff rushing into my chest, so I couldn't help pressing my mouth. This wasn't disgust evoked by an imposing reality.

Neither was it the fear of imaging how Akiko would look like.

...the snow dyed red.

On the icy snow lay a body.

A girl suddenly vanished in front of Yuichi...

There was nothing he could do except for crying for her…

It was depressing.

It happened, and it was so depressing it shut one's memories.

It was the last shard of memory from my forgotten memories.

There was a girl I had got along really well in that winter.

We ate taiyakis, teased each other, and played together. On that day, she dyed the pure, white snow red with her blood and vanished in front of me.

And since then, I had grown to hate snow…

Even when we had reached the hospital, Nayuki and I were prohibited from seeing Akiko.

"We had done all we could, but her condition is still at stake. Even if her condition turns better, and she lives on, the possibility of her to retrieve her consciousness remains…"

That was all I could remember from the doctor's explanation.

I also heard some simple explanation from the police.

In the morning, on the pedestrian road returning home, Akiko was hit by a car that failed to make a turn.

The driver, injured only slightly, told us that even though he made a loud noise when making the turn, Akiko only noticed it at the last moment.

Akiko must have tired herself out through the work all night without sleep that rendered her vulnerable.

It pained us even more since Akiko had always looked as if these things didn't matter to her so much.

Even now, of course, she made no mistake in this accident.

Problems such as how we should talk with the driver were beyond our imagination or control already.

We had to decide them later when my parents come.

Even though I contacted my parents at once upon arriving to the hospital, my father, unfortunately, contracted a serious flu since last week.

"If I force your father to go there, he might get pneumonia, so I'd get there, even if it's only by myself. But before I come, you have to be Nayuki's pillar."

My mother said the same thing as my teacher.

Nayuki and I had thought of living in the hospital together, but as Akiko hadn't gained conscious, and the hospital staff would keep an eye on her every moment, it made no difference if we stayed at home.

“Please contact us if anything happens—no matter when—even when it’s midnight.”

With that said, Nayuki and I returned home.

Nayuki spoke nothing from the moment she was informed of the incident to this very moment on the way home.

Her wan face lost its expressions, still and lifeless. It is doubtful of whether she had even heard what the doctor or the police said.

When we came home, Nayuki suddenly turned her head to the door of Akiko’s room and said, “Mum…”, softly.

I silently held her hand.

But she just drooped her hand without strength and didn’t grasp my hand.

“The sun. The sun is coming out.”

Nayuki’s voice in the alarm clock was the only thing that stayed serene as ever.

The house was quiet, containing no voice. The fragrance of morning toast was lost.

The air conditioner should have been turned on, but this morning felt much chillier than usual.

“Nayuki.”

I tried to knock Nayuki’s door when I got out.

There was no response.

I called her again, but as it proved useless, I tried turning the knob.

The door was knocked.

“Nayuki, I’m eating breakfast now and going to school. I’ll place yours outside the door, so you can have it if you like. If there’s any news from the hospital, please make a phone call to school immediately if you can. I’ll be going to the hospital right after the exams.”

Having that said outside the door, I descended to the first floor and made toast. Then I spread Nayuki’s favourite jam on it and put it, along with her favourite milk, outside her room in front of the door.

“I’m off.”

I had thought of requesting for absence at school, but looking at Nayuki’s condition, I believed I could only take care of my own stuff, so I headed school alone anyway.

At school, Kaori and Kitagawa was equally worried about Nayuki’s condition and Akiko’s.

“Nayuki gets along really good with her mother.”

“Is it fine to leave Minase at home alone?”

"Mmm. I'm worried about her, but considering Akiko's condition, I don't think she would do something as silly as getting herself sent to the hospital too."

"Aizawa."

Kaori approached me.

"You have to help Nayuki out. You have to protect her."

Kaori's voice trembled.

"I…I've known about you a long time ago because Nayuki had always talked about her 'cousin Yuichi' happily."

"I see…"

"She also told me you aren't a person easy to understand because you get embarrassed easily, but you're a gentle boy. She hadn't seen you for many years, but those winters she spent with you playing had always been joyful. Anyone, not only me, would discern that Nayuki loves her cousin Yuichi upon seeing those eyes she had. I'm honest."

Kaori had always been, since the first day of seeing me, looking at me with eyes of ulterior meaning. I could understand why now.

I hoped, if possible, I could know this in a better time and place.

"When you left the town, you had always been the person Nayuki loved the most."

"…thanks."

Kaori's words engraved into my heart deeper than my mother's or teacher's.

Even during the exams, Kaori would sometimes remember about Nayuki and quietly choke in sobs.

After nearly idling and staring at space for three times in front of the table, the exams ended.

Kaori and Kitagawa called to me when I headed off to hospital.

"Work hard, though I should say I'm sorry for saying such a meaningless thing."

"I believe Nayuki's mother's condition would get better."

"Yeah."

I felt, however, that it was impossible unless there was a miracle. Besides, I thought of Kaori saying that it's called a miracle because it wouldn't happen.

In fact, Akiko's condition hadn't changed any bit.

That is to say, her condition would drift downhill at any moment.

For confirmation, I asked the nurse, who told me that Nayuki hadn't come to the hospital.

I waited for a while, but Nayuki still didn't appear.

Phoning home, I was only directed to the voice message box. She must have been locking herself in her room since this morning.

Returning home and looking, I found the toast I placed this morning outside her door in its original state.

It had turned hard, of course.

I then made dinner alone. Anything simple like fried rice would work. With that done, I took it to Nayuki's room.

"Nayuki, dinner is made. I made it. Don't you want to try some?"

I knocked, but got no response.

"You haven't even eaten breakfast. If you don't eat, you'll collapse."

I felt Nayuki's presence inside, so she was there, just not giving any response.

I could empathise with her sorrow and her desperation.

I also loved Akiko. And more importantly, I had just remembered, painfully, the sorrow of losing someone important.

I lightly heaved a sigh and placed the plate in front of the door again.

I didn't know whether I could sleep if I got on bed, but it seemed the thing human most desired when they are fatigued is sleep. So I quickly fell into my dreams when I laid down.

A small knocking sound woke me up.

It was midnight.

The sound just then might have been Nayuki taking the plate in the corridor.

Worried, I quietly crawled up from my bed.

I slowly and meticulously tiptoed to Nayuki's room.

The plate was almost not even touched, but there was something gone on the plate.

"Nayuki. Have you eaten, Nayuki?"

I tried hard to call for her. No response. But if she had eaten some of the rice I made, then there was hope.

"Nayuki. You're awake, aren't you? At least speak something, Nayuki."

I kept knocking the door. Impatient of getting no response, I grabbed the knock and tried turning it. Out of my surprise, it opened easily.

"...I'm coming in."

Nayuki's room was not lit. When we prepared for the exams, her room was a warm, fragrant room. Now it was filled only with stuffy and heavy air.

Nayuki was in the corner of the room.

The faint moonlight from the side of the door revealed a person tightly holding her knees, showing eyes as dull as I had never seen, still and lifeless.

I approached her and called her, wanting to softly touch her shoulders.

"Get out."

It was a soft voice, but embodied straightforward rejection.

"I don't want to see anyone..."

Compared to Nayuki's rejection, her desperate and pitiful look distressed me more.

"How's the dinner I made?" I forced a smile and asked her. "Did you eat it?"

"It tastes bad."

Nayuki only moved her lips with the slightest motion.

"It probably got cold. If you ate it just when it was made, it would be a lot better. I have tried it myself."

"...it's the same even when it's warm."

"No way. That's the best dish I can make in my cooking skills. Okay, I'll make another one and bring it here."

"No."

Her voice trembled gradually. I stopped pretending to be bright.

"...of course, if you compare it to Akiko's cooking..."

"Get out, Yuichi."

Upon hearing Akiko's voice, Nayuki increased her volume.

"It would have been better if I hadn't eaten the food you made. When I had it, I thought that mum wasn't here and I felt even more sad."

"Akiko's still here!"

I followed suit and increased my volume.

"Get out, Yuichi."

I grabbed her hands which she was going to cover her ears.

“Do you think Akiko would be happy if you just sully yourself here and escape reality? Akiko might be saved. She definitely would be. It's Akiko we’re talking about. Unlike any other normal person, she wouldn’t get affected by others and her surroundings. How could she just disappear that easily!”

“...then, are you going to make a miracle happen and save her?”

“That...”

I couldn’t help remaining silent.

Nayuki only moved her lips saying I couldn’t. She then diverted her eyes off me and returned to her dull and blank eyes.

It might even be better if she protested or threw a tantrum.

It was only heart-wrecking to see the girl I treasure fall again in despair.

I let go of her body. Nayuki rolled on the floor like a doll, and then as if remembering something, she lovingly caressed the carpet on the floor.

“I have always been living in this house. There has been several years, in this street and in this house, that I lived only with my mother.”

Nayuki wasn’t exactly speaking to a specific person.

“I don’t remember how my father looked like. It has always been my mother and I, but I don’t feel lonely. My mother is gentle and she taught me a lot of things. For my mother, for school, and for the house, I have also worked very hard for this life.”

In my heart there were a lot of heartfelt memories of Akiko and Nayuki: when I was small, I expressed my dislike when Nayuki brought an abandoned cat, and Akiko made herself busy looking for willing owners. Every morning, Akiko would wake Nayuki up tediously. In the nights, Akiko would make sushi for Nayuki, giving up her sleep.

“I have always been able to smile and work hard because my mother was around.”

But while she spoke, she lifted her head and looked at me. No, perhaps she was looking at the darkness behind me.

“...But now I am, left alone...”

“You’re not alone, Nayuki!”

I couldn’t help saying.

“Don’t you have friends? Kaori, Kitagawa. They’re worried about you. Also, me too...”

“...”

“I’m also here. And Akiko would be coming back.”

Slowly, Nayuki shook her head.

I wanted to embrace her, but the girl in front of me was too far from me. My stretching hand could not reach her.

“It’s impossible.”

Reflected under the moonlight, Nayuki’s face was wan. On that face there occurred the first change.

“There is no way I can smile anymore…”

Large teardrops surfaced on her eyes.

“I can never smile anymore…”

Tears gushed and rolled through her cheeks onto her pajamas. Her adorable cat-paw-printed pajamas absorbed several teardrops.

“There is no way I can work hard anymore….no way I can be strong anymore…because mum isn’t here anymore…mum…mum…”

Then she sobbed like an abandoned cat with sorrowful sounds hysterically.

There was nothing I could do except for looking at her from a side.

On the following day, it snowed since the morning.

I couldn’t quite remember when I returned to my room or when I slept.

The alarm clock had already pointed to the time for class.

But I had no plan to go to school anyway.

I managed to woke up, but I had no appetite for breakfast and just stared into space in my room.

I was startled when the phone rang for its first and only time: my mother called and informed me of my father’s condition: he had stabilised and they would come in about two to three days.

“Is Nayuki fine?”

When my mother asked me, I didn’t know how to answer her.

Sobbing, Nayuki rejected my words and my actions, telling me there was no way she could smile anymore.

How could I become her pillar for her when she was rejecting me?

Nayuki remained the same, having no trace of coming out of her room.

I headed outside without any specific goal. It was cold outside, and even snowing. Although I know this was merely an escape, but I just couldn’t stand passing time lifelessly at home and lamenting my powerlessness.

Come to think of it, it was just as distressing for the people at school to know about this, so I just staggered my way to the snowing streets, pacing back and forth.

Then I headed, though I didn't mean to, to the entrance of the shopping district.

Beside the arched door was a shop selling kid stuff.

It was the shop I bought the red glass pebble for Nayuki, which she used it as a snow rabbit's eye.

It was also in front of this shop that I met the crying girl that winter.

"Yuichi.

"...hey."

And as if waiting for me today too, Ayu appeared in front of me.

"Hey, why aren't you taking a bag of taiyaki today?"

Finding her hands empty, I went to the taiyaki shop with her for a look.

But the shop closed today.

"What bad luck..."

Ayu and I leaned on the steel gate on the door of the shop.

We looked silently at the snow under the roof of the taiyaki shop for a while.

"...Do you remember I once said I was looking for something here?"

Ayu suddenly said.

"Eh...oh, yeah, you did."

Between this short silence, I was actually thinking about Nayuki.

"I have already found it...the thing I had been looking for."

"That's great."

I only answered with my mouth in reflex.

"Yuichi, you don't look very energetic today."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. I understand you very much. I can tell from how you look."

"Understand me very much..."

"Yeah."

Ayu nodded, the wings behind her on her backpack moving along.

"Then can you know what situation I'm in?"

"Try talking about it."

It was unbelievable. With that face and body of a child, she looked in no way of a similar age of mine, yet a warm, nostalgic aura in her was embracing me.

I was told to be strong and be Nayuki's pillar. These demands constricted my heart, but upon meeting Ayu, I was soothed.

"I…"

Gradually I started talking about it, about how I felt it too deep and too much a burden at first, but then was captivated by Nayuki, about how I knew Nayuki also waited and thought of me, about how our hearts once crossed. But because of Nayuki's mother Akiko's accident, Nayuki's heart was broken by sorrow and rejected my support.

Ayu listened to what I said quietly.

"What should I do? I can not make miracles happen. Will a person like me make Nayuki feel better if I'm not at her side?"

"Yuichi…"

Ayu slightly lifted her body and stroked my cheeks with her mitten. A warm mitten. My feeling rushed into me. I wanted to expel all of this sorrow and cry like a child.

"It will happen. A miracle will definitely happen."

"Ayu."

Ayu gave a light kiss on my forehead.

"Yuichi, you treasure Nayuki-chan more than anyone else, don't you?"

"…yeah."

"You want to help Nayuki-chan from the bottom of your heart, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Then it'll happen. If you really wish for it, if you wish for that simple, sincere wish for your important person, it definitely will be granted."

"…"

If I really want to help Nayuki-chan…

If I really wish for it, I wouldn't give up after being rejected a few times.

If I really wish for it, I should have trusted in Nayuki to the last moment.

Though I reckon I have a weird personality, I wanted to believe in Ayu right now.

"Thank you."

I looked at Ayu with a feeling of being saved.

Snowflakes fluttered behind Ayu's white wings, melted, and vanished.

The snowflakes flashed for an instant as they became waterdrops, the toy wings gleaming. In my eyes, they looked like real angel's wings.

No, perhaps, Ayu was the one who looked like an angel.

"...because I've found what I looked for, so I might not come back again."

Ayu stepped back from my side.

"I don't know if I'll see you again, Yuichi."

Walking out to the snow from under the roof, Ayu's presence faded like the snow.

"But I'll never forget you, Yuichi."

"Ayu."

"...I'm leaving, Yuichi."

Without saying goodbye, and never will, Ayu ran on the snow and vanished.

The last thing I saw on her was her usual energetic smile.

"Nayuki."

I called her in front of her room.

"Have you fallen asleep?"

She couldn't be sleeping, but she gave no response.

I didn't care and continued, "I'm waiting for you."

I planned and considered for this.

"I'll be waiting at that place from now on for you, Nayuki. That place you've waited for me in that winter."

Right.

It was at the bench in front of the station that I didn't go to meet her.

With that said, I also put an alarm clock in front of the door.

"I'll place the alarm clock I have long borrowed from you here. If you sleep now, you'll wake up upon hearing its ringing sound."

There was no response coming from the other side of the door.

"I'm off, Nayuki. I'll be waiting for you."

Having said what I needed, I left the house again.

Dusk arrived, the snow outside fiercer.

Even the residents who were used to the snow in this town had to open umbrellas on the streets.

I only wore a jacket and walked outside, letting snow to fall on my body.

In front of the station, white collars going back home and students in groups made the place busy and bustling with excitement. The neon lights on the buildings shone the snow fields, creating a beautiful scene. Beside the rotary, the bench that had no upper covering was covered with stacked snow, no one sitting on it.

I brushed off the snow with my hands and sat on the icy seat.

Speaking of which…

I was also here, a few weeks ago, in a similar weather, waiting for Nayuki.

I couldn’t even figure out why I had come to this town, only regretting for coming.

I had hoped I could leave this town again, as early as possible.

But after waiting for Nayuki for two hours, I found her in front of me, her hands holding a can of coffee as apology.

When I think about it now, I would ponder whether Nayuki did that to me as a revenge for what I did in that winter.

But Nayuki wouldn’t be the kind of person to scheme such a thing.

No matter how you look at it, she was…

Remembering her out of the blue speech, actions, and mode of behaviour, I laughed to myself.

Nayuki, on the other hand, had now shut her heart in despair.

It was winter too, but our situations were reversed.

The only thing I could do was what she did for me that day. Even if she would reject me, I could only bluntly allow my feelings for her to overcome myself and trust her.

Snow piled up on my head. Staying still, I only saw one stranger, a girl, coming to me and saying, “Is everything all right?”

“Okay, don’t worry. This is only a little punishment game.”

I smiled to the girl. “Don’t force yourself too much”, the girl said, and left subsequently.

The punishment game was only something said on the whim, but perhaps it was unusually the right answer.

What I had done to Nayuki couldn’t possibly be compensated by seven strawberry parfaits.

I wouldn't say anything like staying strong, Nayuki.

Neither would I say work had and try to smile.

But I hope you could trust me.

That you could trust me that I treasure you, Nayuki.

If I really wished for a miracle to happen, then it would. That was what Nayuki said.

As such, I would wait for you in the same way, putting all my feelings for you for this miracle.

If I win, and you come, then a miracle will happen.

Pedestrians passing the station gradually decreased.

The bus with its destination lighted red came out from the rotary.

It was the last bus today.

The shops had long closed.

It was so cold my hands, legs, and nose became numb; still, I kept waiting.

At last, the last train had gone off, and the lights of the railway station turned off.

When I checked the time, it had already been the next day.

Has she not come yet?

I had thought that it would have been better if I had not come, and disappointment was natural.

In that winter, Nayuki must have had the same feeling.

When I closed my eyes, Nayuki's childhood face appeared.

She was sitting on the bench alone, worried, looking at the falling snowflakes.

She waited many, many hours for me who didn't come.

Probably she might have thought of just letting herself to freeze into an ice cube.

As this was I thought at this moment.

It's called a miracle because it doesn't happen.

Indeed.

I couldn't really pull it off. I certainly had no privilege for Nayuki to believe in me.

At this moment...

"The snow...is piling up."

All of an instant I thought I had returned to the dream I first had.

“Yuichi, the snow is piling up.”

It was reality. In the snow, the girl with snow covered on her body stood, panting.

“We’re even.”

The young girl’s long hair and clothes were covered with white snowflakes.

“You look cold.”

“You’re about the same.”

“Yeah…”

The young girl smiled, brushing snow off my hair with her finger.

On her face was a smile I hadn't seen for a long time.

“Yuichi.”

With a smile on her face, water droplets in her eyes glowed.

“I still have no way to be strong~”

“…”

“…so,” Nayuki put her hands on my shoulder, looking at me lying dead on the bench, “Can I rely on you, Yuichi? Can you be my pillar?”

I maintained my posture and answered simply, “Sure.”

“Is it okay to believe in it?”

“It’s okay.”

“I won’t delete it. I’ll keep it as evidence. Even so, can you do it? Can you promise me?”

“Yeah.”

“Yuichi, you’re just saying *okay* and *yeah*.”

“I promise you.”

If I could put it into words, I would say a lot to Nayuki to express my feeling. I wanted to hold her and respond to her with my body warmth.

But because of the overflowing emotions in me I couldn’t really connect them with language.

Also…also, it is embarrassing to say, but because my mouth was numb, my body cold, I couldn’t really move.

I regret a bit for working so hard to say what I wanted to, and I endeavoured to move my lips.

“If I break the promise, I’ll treat you a strawberry parfait at the hundred flower house!”

"No. I won't forgive you even if it's a strawberry parfait."

"Um."

How harsh. Then that meant I couldn't break it.

"Yuichi..."

Nayuki's face closed in to me.

"This is the present for being late~"

Nayuki closed her eyes.

"Also..."

I closed my eyes as well.

"About my feelings..."

My numb lips were warmed by Nayuki's lips.

"I had always..."

She could finally make it.

In my memories, that girl with braids who had a snow rabbit in her hand was smiling.

"..always loved you, Yuichi~"

Epilogue

The chilly wind blew.

But the stacked snow on the streets had vanished already.

The grey sky had changed to a vague, pale blue colour.

It was still far from spring, but the seasons were certainly changing.

"Good morning, Yuichi."

"How?"

"What do you mean by *how*...I'm saying good morning."

"How did you manage to eat breakfast earlier than me?"

"Because today's a new semester."

Nayuki happily ate the toast spread with her favourite strawberry jam.

"Is that reason enough for you to wake up early?"

There was nothing special about this morning except for that.

On the table were scrambled eggs, roasted ham, salad, orange juice, and milk.

They were on Minase's usual morning menu.

"Yuichi, we'll be late if you don't hurry."

On top of that, Nayuki had already changed her clothes.

Carefully, I sat beside Nayuki.

"You…hey, what did you eat last night?"

"The same thing you ate~"

"Then why…"

"That's rude. You think I can't wake up by myself."

At these times, I, couldn't say, to be frank, something like "I don't think so."

"I can wake up because of the alarm clock."

"Didn't those mountain of alarm clocks fail to wake you up? Did you buy a new one?"

"No."

Nayuki smiled maliciously.

My heart was filled with a bad foreboding.

"Wait, is it *that* alarm clock?"

"Thanks to it, I can easily wake up in the morn…"

"Stop using it!"

I cried, interrupting her.

"Delete it now!"

"No way."

Nayuki drank coffee leisurely.

"Then I'm going to delete it."

I ran upstairs, heading to Nayuki's room.

"You can't do it, Yuichi!"

Nayuki embraced me from behind, stopping me.

"Even if it's embarrassing, it's evidence, so you can't delete it."

Being whispered from behind, I had a sweet sensation in my heart. I held the knob and leaned my head on the door.

“…it’s fine if you don’t delete it. But stop using it.”

“I can’t wake up tomorrow if I do so.”

“I will wake you up.”

“Every day?”

“Even every day.”

“Perhaps you’ll be doing it for a long time.”

“Okay. No matter how many days, years, or decades, I’ll go and wake you up.”

“Yuichi, what you’re saying now is even more embarrassing.”

But there wasn’t any other way, was it? Nayuki’s hands and her head were soft…and because of the touch of her breasts, my heart was already stolen in the morning.

“Nayuki.”

I turned to face Nayuki. She lifted her head and looked at me, her head tilted.

Our faces naturally closed in to each other, our lips about to touch.

“Do you two still have time?”

Akiko’s voice came from downstairs.

“Woah. It’s so late already.”

“What!”

Looking at the watch Nayuki showed me, I was shocked.

“But we’ll make it if we run.”

“Okay, don’t make haste. Let’s run!”

I ran downstairs.

But before I did that, I didn’t forget to give Nayuki a quick kiss on the lips.

“Take care.”

Akiko showed a gentle smile, seeing the two running people off.

On the usual roads, two people ran usually.

“Why do have to run on the first day of this semester!”

“I woke up early today.”

“I woke up too.”

“But you're slow.”

“Because you ate toast leisurely.”

“You’re rude, Yuichi~”

Nayuki jumped onto my back and played around.

“Your back is wide~”

“Hey, heavy!”

“You’re rude. I’m not heavy~”

Nayuki was giggling beside my ears while fooling around.

“Okay, we have to start running now.”

“Absolutely!”

When we started running, the wind racing against us was comfortable.

The sakura petals were beside us, dancing and fluttering along the wind.

“Good morning.”

“Yo.”

“Good morning, Kaori, and also to Kitagawa.”

“Hi.”

We saw the two usual faces on the first day of the semester when we passed through the gates of the school on the last moment.

“Look. I won.”

Kaori looked at Nayuki and I, and waved to Kitagawa.

“Why are you late on the first day of the semester?”

Kitagawa handed a hundred dollar to Kaori, seemingly reluctant.

“You two...”

I casted suspicious glances at them.

“I thought there would no way for one to come before the first bell ring on the first day of the semester...”

“Please don’t make a bet on someone else!”

I whack Kitagawa by the back of his head.

“Come to speak of it, there is something depressing to tell Nayuki and Aizawa.”

Kaori suddenly lowered her head and looked at the ground.

“What’s wrong?”

“Actually…”

Kaori stopped, and Nayuki looked worried.

“The four of us will be in the same class this year…”

Kitagawa said, bursting into laughter.

“That’s really a bit depressing.”

“I was already very busy with exams, further studying, and future working plans, if there are these people around me…”

“Kaori-sensei, I’ll have you to teach me again.”

“Please don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Kitagawa was whacked again today. Kaori did it this time.

“But it’s great to be in the same class as Yuichi.”

In the classroom, Nayuki smiled in relief.

“Yuichi, when your house is built and your parents move in, you might live somewhere away.”

Nayuki said as if talking to herself.

“If you’re concerned about that,” I pretended Kaori’s depressing tone and said, “My mother phoned me saying my father suddenly had to move for work, and this time he’s going overseas.”

“Woah. I see.”

“So it’s overseas, you see, it’s inconvenient for him to be going there himself, adding his sickness in the winter, my mother decided to go with him.”

“Is that so? So…”

“Yeah, I’m staying here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, we can eat something and celebrate it.”

“Absolutely! Shall we go to the hundred flower house for strawberry parfaits?”

“You really like that…”

I shrugged a little.

“But I want to eat something different today.”

“What do you want to eat?”

“Taiyaki.”

I took Nayuki to the shopping district and paid a visit to the taiyaki shop.

“It’s around time taiyaki’s don't sell too well. I’m happy for you to come buy my taiyakis.”

The taiyaki shop’s old man still remembered me and gave us each an extra taiyaki.

“Speaking of which, I haven’t seen that girl for a while. That kid who wears a strange backpack.”

“I haven’t seen her for some time as well.”

“How could that be?”

“Yuichi, you remembered about her and took me to buy taiyaki?”

On the road, Nayuki asked while eating taiyaki.

“No. I just felt like eating.”

But my footsteps naturally led me to the open space where I usually had taiyakis with Ayu.

“I once said I knew Ayu before, didn’t I?”

“Yeah.”

“But I can’t remember where Ayu lived or what kind of girl she was…”

“I don’t know too.”

I should have met her a lot, but I didn’t even know her address or phone number. But perhaps there wasn’t the need to in the first place.

“Ayu, are you still energetic?”

“She must be very energetic.”

No matter where she were.

“This is the only good point about her.”

“She’ll get angry if she hears you.”

“Probably.”

On the old tires I once sat with Ayu now sat Nayuki and I, eating the extra taiyaki.

…Yuichi.

There was a feeling that Ayu would be attracted by the smell of taiyaki and quickly appear nearby.

Miracles happen, Ayu.

As what you have said.

But even now, I don't think I was the one who made it happen.

"This...is how I think."

Nayuki lightly touched her fluttering hair.

"Ayu's angel wings...perhaps...really were for that purpose."

"The real Ayu would really find it a trouble if she heard this."

"Yuichi..."

Every time Ayu was mentioned, Nayuki would show a troubling smile.

Nevertheless...

Perhaps Ayu was just a girl with no set living place; a girl who loved taiyaki and was energetic.

Still, if I had really retrieved the memories in the deepest place in my heart, Ayu was, what Nayuki said, a real angel.

No, Yuichi.

Ayu's voice sounded afar.

It was one person who enabled the miracle to happen with the energy from the strong wishes he had for his important one.

After that, Nayuki and I played in the shopping district till the evening. I was surprised to find in the bookstore that Nayuki have read a lot of books, knowing tons and tons of writers and their works. In the playground, I couldn't stop laughing at Nayuki's expected sporty nerves.

"We ate taiyaki today, so let's leave strawberry parfaits for next time."

"Speaking of strawberry parfaits, I still owe you seven ones."

"I'll let you pay me back one by one."

"How long do I have to pay you back..."

"When you're almost done, you'll owe me again~"

"Hey, when did you acquire this bullying personality?"

"I'm infected by your bad personality~"

Whack.

"Ouch...look, you have a bad personality."

"You're noisy."

“But it’s good if you pay me back slowly.”

“...whatever you want.”

It’s about time we returned, with that said, we headed home.

“Akiko has made dinner waiting for us.”

“Eh? Yuichi?”

At the same time, Akiko came out from the kitchen to the corridor upon hearing Yuichi’s voice from the second floor.

But Yuichi and Nayuki hadn’t made any traces of having returned.

“It must be my imagination.”

Akiko quickly agreed to herself and returned to preparing dinner.

The real reason was that Nayuki's alarm clock hadn’t been properly turned off this morning.

On the second floor, Nayuki’s alarm clock played the message again.

Nayuki...

Although I cannot let miracles happen...

I can still stay at your side.

I promise you.

When you’re sad, I’ll comfort you.

When you’re happy, I’ll laugh with you.

I will stay here forever.

I won’t go anywhere ever again.

Because...

I seem to have fallen in love with you.

-fin-

References

1. *-chan* is only for something cute and small, not for someone as big as Nayuki*
2. Ayu is a homophone of *fish* in Japanese; Taiyakis coincidentally resemble fish.

Return to Main Page	Forward to Volume 2